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WESTERN ROMANCES

MARCH
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By RAY NAFZIGER

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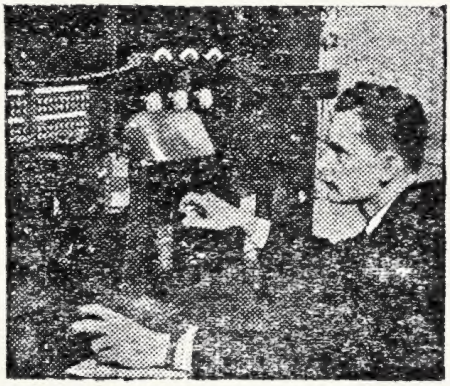

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Vol. 29, No. 88 MARCH, 1939

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KENTUCKY BELL.....Norrell Gregory 43
Even out in the clean sweep of the prairies, her brother's disgrace threatened to crush her happiness and cheat her of love.

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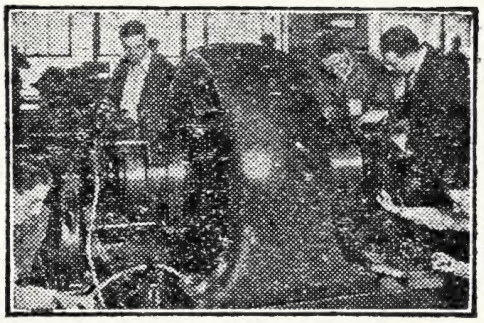

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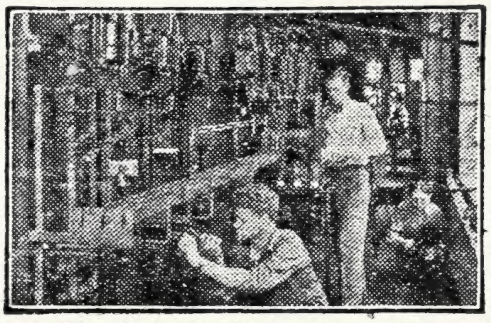

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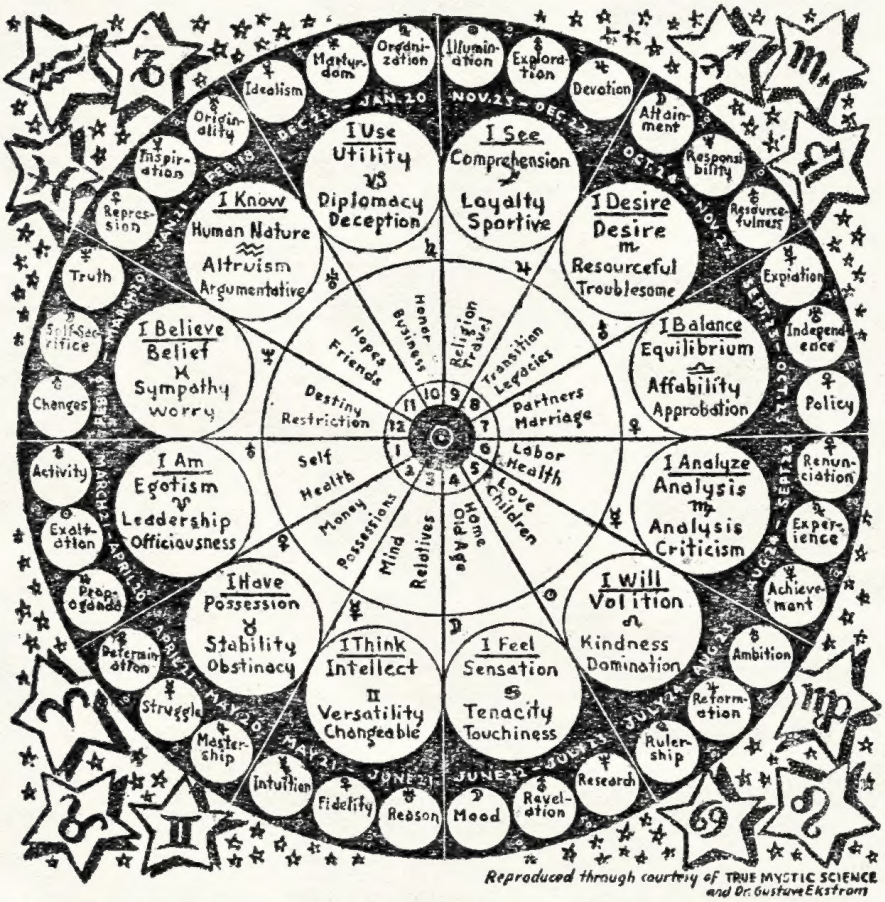

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Only the tapideros saved the girl from being slashed and torn to bits

Driving a berserk roan madly through spiked and dangerous brush, she raced to save a strange rider from death!

DANGER lurked that moonlit night in the thick tangles of spiny thickets about the Craille ranch headquarters. And fear slowed Molly Craille's heart as she stood in the doorway, listening intently, her eyes straining to penetrate the *mogotes* of mesquite and black chaparral. For a moment, overhead dark dots showed against the moon's silver disk: buzzards floating to some carrion feast.

A little shiver ran through the slim body of the girl. Never had she known what it was to be utterly alone on the ranch—never until now. The three Craille cowhands, with rumors of a rustler gang on its way out of Mexico to raid the ranch, had fled, as animals race panic-stricken before a forest fire, leaving Molly Craille alone on the ranch she had inherited from her uncle, forlorn, helpless, but with courage too stubborn to run, with pride too great to admit the fear that filled her.

Yet Molly Craille had never seen the creek bottom clearing more peaceful than it was tonight. The heavy fragrances of *vara dulce* and white brush scented the warm air. There was no sound until, from a chinaberry tree by the corrals, a mocking-bird sleepily trilled a few notes.

It was so still again then that Molly Craille could hear the slow, heavy beat of her heart. Her uncle, Dade Craille, while he was alive, had seen to it that his niece was never left alone here in this thorny tangle of brush country. He had never trusted her to be alone, because he suspected that she was like her mother. Because Molly's mother had been an actress before her marriage, he had considered her a bad woman. To prevent his orphaned niece from following in the mother's footsteps, he had kept Molly isolated, almost a prisoner, on his ranch.

That was why news of her uncle's recent death in Mexico had brought her shock, rather than sorrow. It had brought terror also. The gangs of raiding *ladinos* from Mexico had always feared her uncle too much to invade his ranch, but they would have no fear of a lone girl. Word had come that a group was already on its way north.

The mocking-bird's song rose again, with a disturbed note in it. Molly tensed. Hoofs were padding along the creek trail toward the clearing, and above the scrub growth she had a glimpse of a rider. A man too tall, too wide-shouldered, to be one of the cowboys who had fled. Nor was he lumpy enough to be one of the neighboring Curlews, Nick and his two brothers.

Into the clearing the rider, on a big dun, came boldly, to pull up some thirty feet from the house. Garb and rigging were distinctly below-the-Border. The sombrero he wore was too wide-brimmed for the brush country. Moonlight glinted from the silver ornaments on his saddle and the conchas of the *chaparejos*.

This stranger must be the advance scout of a marauding band, Molly thought despairingly, and a little cry came to her lips and died there. Her hand tightened on the pearl-handled .32-caliber six-shooter she was holding at her side.

Bulking large in his saddle, the rider surveyed the house a moment, while the mocking-bird floated liquid syllables of music on the air. Then, "Anyone home?" he called, with a drawling ease that was unmistakably of Texas. No Mexican then—but that brought no reassurance to Molly Craille. Many of the Americans who lived below the Border were renegades, who leagued with the Mexicans to sweep the brush country of its cattle herds.

It would do no good to hide; better to face him openly. She stepped outdoors, keeping the gun hidden in a fold of her divided riding skirt.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

THE rider seemed startled; for a long moment he stared at the girl standing in the shadow of the house.

"I'm Rance Landers, which doesn't mean anything to you, Miss Craille," he said as he swept off his silver-banded sombrero. "I take it that you are Miss Molly Craille. I've just ridden from below the Border. It's late to call, and I'll bother you but a few minutes. With your permission, I'll rouse some of your help and get a feed for my horse, a cup of coffee for myself, and directions how to reach Coma City."

Instinct warned Molly against inviting this Rance Landers to dismount; to order him instead to ride on. But even suspicious, dour Dade Craille had never refused hospitality to a rider, and she would not break that rule.

"There's feed for your horse in

the nearest corral," she told him. "Come to the house when you've taken care of him; I'll have something for you to eat."

While the rider turned toward the corrals, the girl went into the kitchen and lighted a bracket oil lamp. Building a fresh fire in the big cook range, she heated bread and meat left from supper; boiled water for coffee.

Then, since if one offered hospitality, it might as well be done wholeheartedly, she passed into the living room at the front of the house to light the hanging lamp. The big room contained her mother's furnishings—tables and upholstered chairs, an Oriental rug, a rosewood piano—all purchased in New Orleans, her mother's home.

Returning to the kitchen to set the table, she heard the jingle of the stranger's spurs coming from the corrals, and went to the living room door to receive him, noting that he walked with a slight limp that could have been from a bullet or a bad fall. More probably a bullet, she decided as she had her first look at his deeply tanned face, with a hard cast to his features which did not ordinarily go with a man so young. His eyes brilliantly blue; a shock of thick dark hair was released as he took off his sombrero.

Briefly, on entering the room, he looked about him, and then he glanced at the girl. For a moment he stood in obvious surprise, looking at Molly Craille, the tan of sun and wind of many rides coloring her fair skin, a statuesque, breathtaking figure as she stood under the many-faceted crystals of the hanging lamp.

"You're not alone here, surely?" he asked, as his eyes lingered on the gold masses of hair coiled about her proudly-held head.

"Yes I am—just now," she replied—and then hurried on to a white lie: "But I'm expecting the ranch riders back soon. They—they rode out to see if any cattle had been caught in the maverick trap at Azul Springs. But you must be hungry. Will you come into the kitchen?"

WHILE her guest washed in the little side room, where a pump drew water from a cistern, Molly made coffee after the fashion that her New Orleans mother had taught her—spooning hot water through freshly-ground coffee. Roast beef and warmed-up biscuits came hot from the range. She placed these, with mesquite honey and freshly churned butter, on the table, covered with a Mexican woven cloth as bright as a Saltillo serape and laid with china and silver which were heirlooms from her mother's family.

Rance Landers smiled a little shyly as he sat down gingerly at the table. The smile lit up his face, softened its stern lines.

"I'm not used to this luxury," he drawled, "so excuse me if I make a few bobbles. My meals of late years have been eaten in cattle camps."

He should have said rustler camps, thought Molly, and poured coffee into a large cup, knowing that range riders consumed it in half-gallon lots.

He ate sparingly, despite his long ride, and once done, asked her permission to roll a cigarette.

"As I said," he remarked, "I had planned to ride tonight to Coma City. I have business there which I wish to get done with as soon as possible. Business that concerns you, Miss Craille."

"What business?" she inquired.

"Something which will be no more pleasant for you than for me," he stated, and his eyes met hers, with a grayish-blue tinge of lilacs in their irises. For a moment their glances held, Molly's studying the young rider calmly. This talk of business could be only a ruse to conceal his real errand: stealing cattle, spying for a rustler band.

"Your uncle was taken ill at the Hacienda Victoria, which happens to be next to my ranch. He sent for me and asked me to do him a certain favor in connection with the ranch he was leaving to you. I could not refuse him." He had barely lighted the cigarette before he tossed it into the stove and got restlessly to his feet.

"It will take some time to explain, and it's already late. It can wait until tomorrow. I had intended to ride on to Coma City tonight, but if your men are gone, I can't leave you here alone, so near the Border."

Molly

Molly stilled her panic as she too arose. "I don't mind being alone," she declared. "I'll be perfectly safe. My men will be back soon. And even if they are not—" she fumbled desperately for some excuse to get rid of the visitor, "—I am expecting a neighbor. Nick Curlew."

"Nick Curlew? Tonight?" he asked, and his eyes narrowed.

Evidently he knew of Nick Curlew and the man's reputation. Her uncle would have told the man about Nick Curlew, of course. Too late she realized the meaning that would be put on her words. There could be only one meaning when a girl alone on a ranch expected Nick Curlew's kind this late at night.

"I see," said Rance Landers slowly, while the girl flushed deeply. "That being the case, of course I'll be on my way." Looming tall, wide-shouldered in the small, low-ceiled kitchen, he looked down at her, his face a grim mask. "I am obliged to you for your hospitality, Miss Craille." His eyes met hers again and he shook his head a little, as if puzzled. "Your uncle told me that you were pretty. He warned me against falling in love with you at first sight. He said all men do and I can well believe that."

He came a little closer to her. "When I saw you, it was harder to believe other things your uncle had said about you. But—" He shrugged his shoulders. "It seems he was right, and you know your own business. I left Texas a few years ago because of a girl — one like you. She looked as you do—a girl so fine a man would be willing to die for her. She fooled me: she was a different kind. And since you're that kind, too—well, nothing can be done about it."

And then, before she could move, he had taken one long stride and his arms were about her, bringing her close to him. His eyes were glowing; he was smiling again, but there was a mocking bitterness on his lips.

"You are pretty, Molly Craille—the kind to turn men's heads. I've ridden a long way—I'll have to do a lot more riding for you— And I think I should have at least one kiss."

Holding her in the vise of his arms, he bent his head and his lips closed down on her mouth, lingered there. Within Molly Craille for a brief moment worked a tumult that made her heart beat with sudden unexplained violence. Then she was struggling free, shoving him away with all her strength. And although her strength was puny beside his, he allowed himself to be pushed back.

"You—you—" she blazed out. "How dare you—"

"I've known that kind, too," he said quietly. "The kind who keeps her favors for only one man. I forgot myself, Miss Craille, and I apologize to you—and Nick Curlew. But I still think one kiss was owing to me."

"You get out!" she ordered in hot anger, and suddenly swept the pearl-handled gun from a niche in the wall, where she had hidden it while preparing supper for the visitor. "If you're scouting for cattle rustlers, there'll be plenty of guns to meet you and them, Rance Landers. And if you try to come near me again, I'll shoot you!"

Before the hot indignation in her voice and eyes, he wavered a little, took a deep breath.

"I'd be willing to swear still that you were lying," he murmured, half to himself. "I'm sorry. A man can be excused for making a fool of himself when he meets you, Miss Craille. Nothing like this will ever happen again—moonlight or no moonlight. Our relationship will be strictly business. I made your uncle a promise, and I'm making you one. Thank the Lord you'll be of legal age and able to handle your own affairs before long. I'll be riding on—leaving the ranch to you and Nick Curlew."

He strode through the door, forgetting to ask about the trail to Coma City, and heading for the corrals, reappeared a little later, leading his horse. Molly Craille was watching him from a window, a storm of mingled anger and shame within her.

How could she have been so foolish as to mention Nick Curlew, when she was expecting him no more than she expected the man in the moon? Maybe Rance Landers was what he claimed he was: a rancher, and not a scout for a rustler band. And maybe there was truth in what he had said about a promise made to her uncle. Maybe he was on the level, and if so, what could he be thinking of her? Well—that was obvious.

AS HE swung into his saddle, from down creek, beating toward the clearing, came the thud of many hoofs, riders, on a lope. Landers had heard them too and sat waiting until the horsemen—the high-peaked hats and flat-horned saddles denoting vaqueros from across the Border—came in sight. A score of them, flowing up the creek in a menacing stream. To see them better, Molly Craille had stepped outdoors, and now Landers, spurring his mount hard, came toward her to pull up by her side.

"Quick!" he said. "You'll have to get out of here! Those are Mexican renegades!"

"I won't run," she said determinedly.

"You'll run and run plenty!" he told her roughly, and leaning from the saddle, caught her about the waist to swing her to the saddle in front of him. Holding her there, he sank spurs into the big dun and headed west into a wagon trail which had been carved through the thick, almost impenetrable growth of thorny mesquite and chaparral.

From behind them came a long yell, and then the loud explosion of a gun. As the big dun pounded along the trail, the riders poured across the clearing to follow, raising a chorus of yapping yells, sending a hail of shots.

Bullets clicked against the scrub growth which hemmed the trail within junglelike walls. For a quarter of a mile they raced, with the doubly burdened horse, weary from his long trip across the Border, making a game effort. It was not enough: the hastily aimed bullets were whining closer, the hammer of hoofs growing to a thunder.

"We can't outrun them!" said Landers. "I'll get off; hold them back. They can't make any time if they're

forced into the brush. You ride on to your nearest neighbor."

"No!" Molly protested, realizing the hopelessness of a one-man stand against the rustler horde. But Landers had already pulled up to seat her in the saddle and push the reins into her hands. Then, whipping his rifle up from the saddle scabbard, he slapped the dun's flank and the big horse gave a startled leap and carried her away.

Behind her came the crash of Lander's rifle, and the triumphant shouts of the pursuing riders changed suddenly to yells of dismay. Abruptly the hoofbeats died, but Molly knew he had only checked the raiders, that it would be only a matter of minutes until they surrounded him. The dun was hard to pull down, but she slowed him, to swing from the broad trail into the thick brush, angling back toward the sound of the battle.

ALL her opinion of the stranger had changed on the instant. Renegade rustler and liar Rance Landers might be, but he was fighting now to give her time to escape—a fight that could end only in his death. From the sound of the guns, she knew that Landers was retreating to the side of the trail, seeking cover on a rocky little ridge. Sending the big dun smashing through the brush, she located Landers finally, crouched behind a long ledge.

"What are you doing back here?" he demanded.

"Hurry!" she ordered, holding out an empty stirrup for him to mount. "You'll be killed if you stay. I know a narrow trail near here that it will take them some time to find."

He swung up behind her and they started away, while after them the horsemen crashed blunderingly, swearing at the thorny growth. A short hundred yards and she had piloted the dun into the narrow trail and they were racing along it, leaving the men far behind.

"Only one reason why those hombres are up here," declared Landers, when it became plain that they had thrown off their pursuers. "To steal your cattle. They'll sweep along these creeks and ridges in the moonlight, and by morning be shoving over half your stuff across the river. We'll have to call in your neighbors to help stop them."

"The only near neighbors are the Curlews—which is where this trail leads," said Molly. "But there are only three men at the Curlew ranch. Nick and his two brothers."

"Won't be enough," he said. "If I can get a fresh horse, I can ride down below the Border and raise a bunch of Mexican ranchers to meet this bunch by the time they hit the river. The Mexicans have been suffering as much as the Americans from these raids."

"But why should you concern yourself with my affairs?" she asked. "It's my fight—saving my cattle."

"I might as well tell you now why it happens to be my fight, too," he said. "Your uncle, before he died, made me executor of his estate. He left the ranch and stock to you, but he made me promise to look after your property. I didn't want the job, but I couldn't refuse a dying man, and your uncle, too, Miss Craille, was not just a stranger. Years ago he was Dad's partner."

"I do remember Uncle mentioned a rancher in Mexico who used to be his partner," said Molly, and flushed. Her tight-lipped uncle had also remarked that his ex-partner had a son whom he wished Molly were fit to marry. Dade Craille had said that bitterly two months before, after Molly and Nick Curlew had returned from a ride. He had seen them at the exact moment when Nick, after dismounting, without warning, had put his thick, short arms around Molly and kissed her.

She had torn herself away from the embrace, but her uncle, of course,

had suspected the worst. Before he had died, Dade Craille must have told Rance Landers baldly that Molly and Nick were lovers; that his niece was a worthless baggage who had inherited the wild blood of her actress mother.

TEARS of humiliation filled her eyes. She hated her uncle, his dark suspicions, the loneliness and isolation in which he had kept her on the ranch, but most of all for what he must have told Rance in warning him against her. That must be cleared up. Landers was not like her uncle—he was reasonable.

"Just what did my uncle tell you about me?" she asked. "That Nick and I were lovers—that I was a fickle woman who gave her kisses to everyone who passed by? Believe what you wish, but I lied when I said I expected Nick Curlew tonight. I was afraid of you, a stranger from below the Border. I said the first thing that came to my mind to get rid of you."

The horse had stopped of his own accord and Rance took her shoulders, turned her gently toward him. "Listen to me, Molly. It doesn't matter now what Dade Craille told me. I'm to blame, I should have known better. I knew you were not what he had said you were, but I had myself convinced otherwise. You looked sweet and good, Molly, but like a fool I wouldn't believe what I really saw: a kid, plumb scared to death and trying to act *muy bravo.* How could your uncle have suspected you, talked about you?"

"You really believe in me, Rance Landers?" she asked, and her voice broke.

"As God is my witness," he said huskily. "I'll make it up to you when we've saved your cattle, and if anyone ever dares so much as breathe a whisper against you again, I'll kill him. Those Mexicans will be the rest of the night combing your range and shoving your cattle toward the Rio. I can get back with men to meet them near the river when they cross, which they always do at dawn. But first I've got to leave you some place where you'll be safe."

"The Curlew ranch is the nearest," she said. "Nick and his brothers could meet you at the river, help you fight these raiders. Their own cattle are in danger, too. I can stay at the Curlew ranch tonight with their mother."

Together they rode on, the dun keeping a steady lope all the distance to the Curlew place.

Surprisingly, Nick and his two brothers, Stan and Buck, were still up when they arrived; out at the corrals, either saddling or unsaddling. Nick Curlew came out to meet them. A chunky fellow in his thirties, handsome except for a somewhat flattened nose, Nick counted himself a lady-killer.

"Raiders, eh?" he grunted, after Molly had introduced Landers and told of the invasion of the Mexican horsemen. "And you figure to get a bunch below the Border to stop 'em at the river, Landers? That's *bueno.* None of us will have any cattle left if them birds ain't stopped; it's only luck they haven't hit our ranch yet. Me and my brothers will meet you at the river—at dawn. At that creek that comes out below Molly's ranch? Fine. There's a good horse in the corral—a fast one with plenty bottom. Saddle him and shove on the reins, Mister Landers, ridin' to Mexico. Gather your men, and in the mornin' we'll make buzzard-bait of that Greaser outfit."

Two minutes later, Landers was thundering south on his fresh mount, leaving Molly with Nick and his brothers.

"Has your mother gone to bed?" Molly asked Nick, seeing no light in the house.

Nick grinned. "I dunno; she's visiting her sister over at Coma City.

Molly, it's time we traded a little talk. You're wantin' to save your cattle. *Bueno.* Me, I'll see they're saved. But I got to have pay for it. I'd say a fair price would be for you to marry me."

"What are you talking about, Nick?" she exclaimed. "Are you crazy?"

"Nope. It's the only out for you. That Landers bird ain't going to save your cattle. 'Stead of them rustlers ridin' into his trap *he's* going to ride into one and get killed — him and the men he brings. And you'll lose your cattle, sweetheart — unless you make a bargain with me, savvy?"

"But how can you save them?" asked Molly, thunderstruck by this sudden turn in Nick Curlew's attitude. "There's only three of you—not enough to stop the raid."

"That's *my* little secret," replied Nick, with a wolfish grin.

Rance Landers

A SUDDEN suspicion came to Molly. "Since you can't possibly stop those rustlers by force, it must mean that you can persuade them to let my cattle alone."

"What you drivin' at?" he snarled.

"I mean that you've been helping in their raids, Nick, tipping them off when it would be safe to raid a ranch —and then getting your split for the information you gave."

He started a bellowing denial and then shrugged his shoulders. "What of it?" he asked roughly. "You're an innocent little fool! Livin' here cooped up in the brush—so damn' ignorant you were plumb shocked to death that time I grabbed that hug and kiss. It's time you learnt a few things about life, and I'll do the teachin'. It's me you've got to trust, not this Landers bird that wormed himself in with your uncle and got Dade to give him authority to run your ranch until you're of age. Git wise, you little fool! He'll sell your property and take the money!"

"He won't; he's not that kind. I can trust him. He saved me from being captured by that gang tonight. *You* planned that raid, Nick," she accused him bitterly. "And after they had taken me into Mexico with them, you'd have rescued me and my cattle, too—for a price."

Nick Curlew's face became ugly. "Smart, ain't you?" he growled. "You better be smart enough to keep your mouth shut on what you think. I was plannin' to let them Mexes take you down to Mexico, but I can handle you just as well here. There'll be no one in these thick tangles to interfere when I get back. Me and the boys got to be ridin', to get ready that trap for your Landers friend. Take your choice between givin' in or tryin' to fight me—it'll all end the same way."

"There's no choice!" Molly burst

out, and turning suddenly, ran toward Nick's horse, hoping to get into the saddle and escape. But the horse shied as she neared him, and the next moment Nick had caught her. Cursing, he picked up the girl and carried her, kicking and struggling, to a small adobe building between the house and corrals. Shoving her inside, he slammed the door shut and snapped a padlock through the hasp.

IT WAS pitch dark in the single room of the small building, which smelled strongly of smoke. Molly knew it to be the solid-walled, windowless adobe shed where the Curlews smoked the hams and shoulders of wild hogs that had fattened on elm and acorn mast along the creeks.

She shouted angrily at Nick, but there came the rapid thud of hoofs as the Curlews rode away, evidently to join the Mexicans sweeping the brushy pastures of her ranch. Frantic, she began to beat with her fists on the door. The loss of her cattle she could stand, but she couldn't let Rance Landers lose his life at the Rio ford. In some way she had to break free of her prison, ride to warn him.

Then, calming, she drew out a box of matches she carried in a pocket of her divided skirt and struck one. The little flare showed that the room was empty, save for the pole racks from which the curing meat was suspended when the smokehouse was in use. These she tore down and piled against the door. Then, breaking off a few splinters, she kindled a fire.

The little blaze, growing in size, licked at the stout boards of the door, until little tongues of flame began creeping up the stout boards. Walls and roof were of adobe brick and could not catch, but smoke filled the room and she muffled her face in her neckerchief. Becoming more dense, it set her to coughing, forcing her to retreat to the far corner to crouch there, breathing the clearer air close to the door.

Crackling savagely, flames enveloped the whole door and literally burned it from its hinges. The draft cleared the smoke from the room and Molly got to her feet. Small flames still burned along the frame, but there was no time to lose. Protecting her hair with the neckerchief, she dashed outside.

At the corrals she found but one horse, a big hammer-headed roan which she knew to be one of the best brush horses in the country, but a dangerous one, because of his habit of turning crazy with excitement when he raced through the brush after wild cattle. Careless of the roan's reputation, she found an old saddle in a shed and cinched it on the horse. In the same shed she found a pair of the leather leggins it was necessary to wear in riding the brush country.

Squirming into them, she hurried to the house, where she appropriated a carbine with a few cartridges, a sombrero, a duck brush jacket and gauntlet gloves. Clad in the jacket, hat and gloves, she returned to the corrals to slip the carbine into the saddle scabbard. Then, mounting, she headed along a trail that ran toward the river. It was a long ride to where Bogan Creek emptied into the river; a fast one to reach it by dawn. But the roan had speed and endurance, and once warmed up, he took a long lope that fairly ate up the miles.

When the trail swung on a tangent that would take her miles out of the direct course to the river, the girl without hesitation turned her mount straight into the brushy thickets. This was to the big roan's liking. At once he quickened his pace, recklessly crashing through the spiny clumps, where a million deadly claws and fangs lurked for the unwary. Racing through the brush was an old sport to the roan; his equine memory went

back to hundreds of thrilling chases after mavericks. It was impossible to hold him back; through thick tangles of mesquite and knife-thorned evergreen *coma,* the roan smashed with the noise of a runaway wagon and team, cannily dodging clumps of prickly pear, *lecheguilla* and the leafless *junco,* on which only the butcher birds would alight.

The farther the roan ran through the brush, the more uncontrollable he got. Finally, going berserk, he simply ran away with his rider. Only the *tapideros,* which covered the stirrups and the thick leggins, duck jacket and gauntlet gloves, saved the girl from being slashed and torn to bits.

Even more of a menace was the danger of being swept from the saddle. Molly was forced to call on all her skill as a brush country rider. Again and again she had to flatten herself to the roan's neck to avoid low branches of the larger trees, to swing rapidly from one side to the other to avoid the threats of deadly snags. There was no pulling the roan down; he was like a runaway locomotive.

BLOOD was trickling down an arm from the lancing of a stub, but Molly ignored that pain and the many scratches her face was receiving from the lashes of tree branches, and at last they emerged from the thicker brush onto a wide bench above the river. Out in the open again, the big roan lost his crazy desire to run and Molly was able to halt him.

The low river banks, partly covered by mist, could be seen faintly in the gray light of approaching dawn, spaced with patches of arrow weed and open stretches of grass. Dawn was imminent. Leaning forward in her saddle, with the heart of the panting horse pounding against her legs, Molly scanned the river bottom. Opposite the creek mouth below, somewhere in the mists on the other bank, Rance Landers and the force he had recruited were riding toward the trap Nick Curlew and the Mexican renegades waited to spring. She was too late to ford the river to tell Landers of the ambush, but there might still be some way to warn him.

Nick Curlew's men, she guessed, would have left the stolen herd of cattle some distance back from the river, to ride on ahead to meet Landers. She searched the creek slopes for them, and as more light came into the sky, located a group of men in high-peaked hats, sitting on a little hillock close to the mouth of the creek—the Mexican rustlers and the Curlews, waiting to open fire when Landers' party rode into the river. That would not be long now: the first clouds were turning pink in the east.

Dismounting and lifting the carbine she had taken from the Curlew house, Molly knelt and flung a shot that sailed over the high-peaked hats of the waiting men, hoping either that the shot might warn Landers of danger, or stir the ambushers to reveal themselves. The renegades, as the bullet sang over them, ducked for cover and then sent a wild, hasty volley of shots up the slope. She emptied her rifle, and then, returning to the roan, climbed back into the saddle.

It was high time: she had stirred up a hornets' nest. Already some of the renegades had mounted, to start riding toward her. Across the river there was yet no sign of Landers and his men, but suddenly rifles, upstream and on the American side, opened in a hot fire directed at the rustlers who, uncertain what this second attack meant, hastily bunched up. Molly was as puzzled as they were, but she knew that the men upstream must be friends.

Then, as the firing from the unknown attackers increased in volume,

the whole rustler band turned to race straight up the slope toward Molly. In only one direction lay hope of safety for her, and she spurred the roan hard, down the slope at an angling course, to join the force in the river bottom.

This brought her out into the open, and the rustlers, catching sight of the riders, at once opened fire, swerving to try to cut her off from the river.

BULLETS sang past her as the roan stretched out. A hasty glance over her shoulder revealed Nick Curlew in the lead. Evidently he had identified her, for they were shooting at the roan, trying to set Molly afoot, planning to take her prisoner again.

Below her and directly ahead sounded a sudden clatter of hoofs, and out of the river mists raced half a dozen men. There was no mistaking the wide-shouldered rider at their head. Molly raised a shout compounded of relief and joy, and then smothered it. This was no time to distract Rance's attention!

Behind her the raiders checked their mounts, to fire a hasty volley of shots. A burst of return fire came from the guns of the advancing men, and looking back, Molly saw Nick Curlew go limp in the saddle, clutch desperately at his saddlehorn. The rest, in panic, swung their horses in a wild flight. Nick, still holding to the horn, pounded after them as they plummeted back to the river.

But there was no retreat open there: another group of hard-riding men, their guns blazing, raced at full speed up out of the bottoms to meet them.

Before that impetuous charge, the raiders faltered and suddenly scattered in wild flight, every man for himself, trying to reach the river and the security of Mexico. From the side and above, guns took a deadly toll of the fugitives, emptying saddles, sending down horses. Barely half a dozen men reached the brushy cover along the stream.

Landers, his horse covered with sweat, raced up to Molly and flung himself from his saddle, bewildered at seeing the girl, shocked at the evidence of the wild ride she had made. But instead of asking questions, gently his arms drew her from the saddle, and, suddenly after the nerve-wracking hours, Molly relaxed in them.

"You look as if you'd been through every thicket in forty miles!" Landers said, as he eased her to the ground.

"The roan and I missed a few," she responded, forcing a smile. "But I must look a wreck. The Curlews, Rance—they were in cahoots with the rustlers. They had a trap set to spring when you started to cross the river. But thank God, you didn't cross! Who are those men with you?"

"Rangers. I remembered hearing that a troop was stationed some miles up the river, and rode to fetch 'em. And so it was your gun that brought those renegades out? You positively don't look a wreck, but your arm needs bandaging, and a doctor as soon as we can get you to one. You rode all the way from the Curlew ranch to warn me? Molly, you must have cared a little—to do that. I'm hoping so, for I loved you from the moment I first saw you, although I fought against it. I told you I'd try to make it up—for what I said and did at your house last night. Can you ever forget the blunder of a fool knothead?"

Molly Craille looked up smilingly at Rance Landers and noticed that his strong fingers were trembling as he bound a bandage about her arm.

"Maybe," she murmured slowly, "I wouldn't want ever to forget that kiss you gave me, Rance—or your arms about me. After Nick Curlew had locked me up and I knew that you

were riding into danger, I knew that I wouldn't care to live unless *you* lived. And I knew that I wanted to be with you, Rance, wherever you were—the rest of my life. Uncle Dade, if he were alive, would think it wicked of me to want that, and to want to kiss you and be kissed by you."

Rance smiled grimly. "I don't wish your Uncle Dade any bad luck," he remarked, as he folded Molly Craille in his arms. "But I have a sneaking suspicion he is down in a place where he'll have time to regret the way he suspected and slandered his own niece—down there along with a lot of other folks who thought that there was something plumb wicked about love!"

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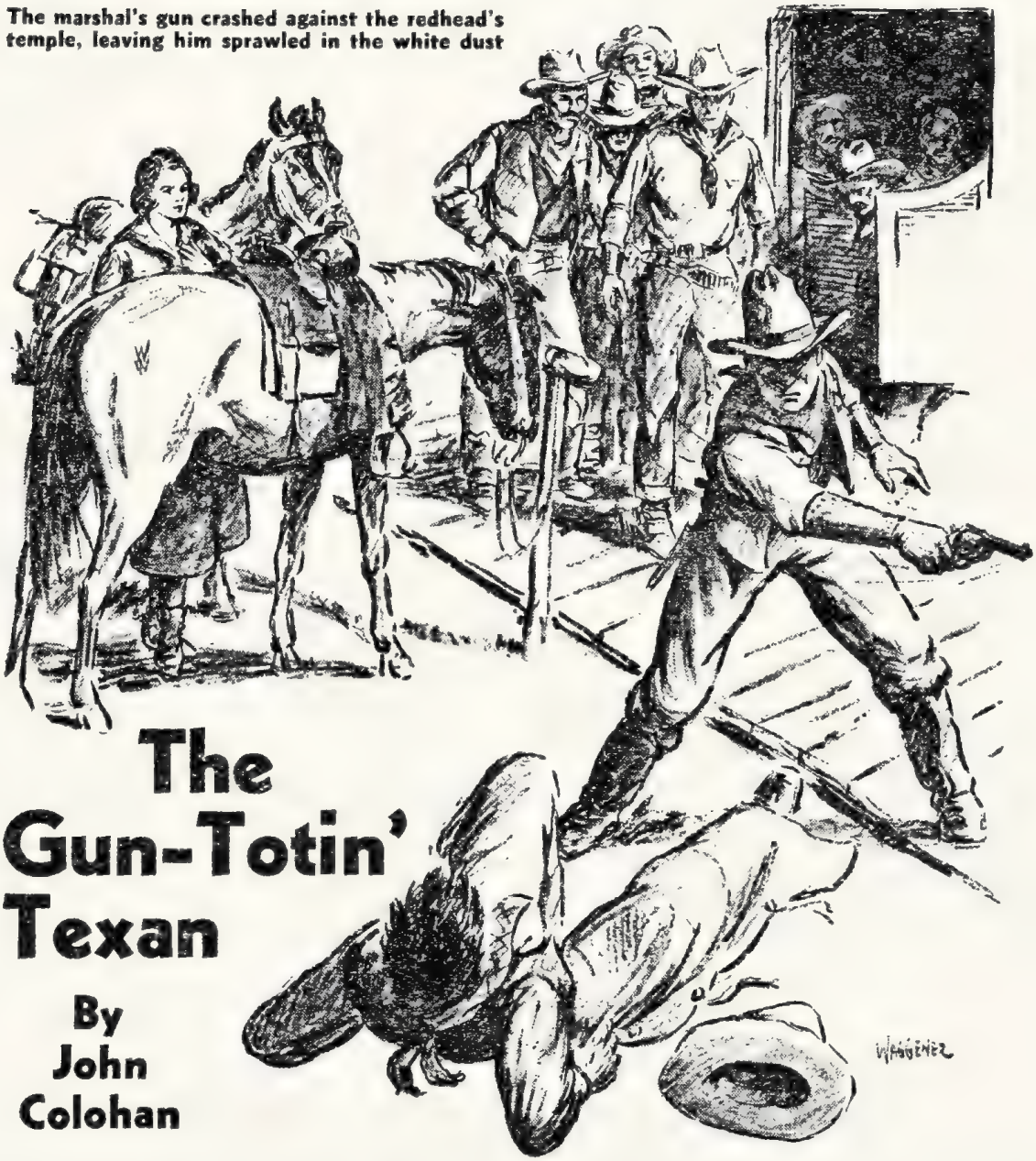
The marshal's gun crashed against the redhead's temple, leaving him sprawled in the white dust



The Gun-Totin' Texan

By John Colohan

This big lawman she loved—the gun-totin' Texan—was he just another killer—the murderer of her own brother?

THE orchestra was playing *The Blue Danube*. The whole lower floor of the big Circle C house had been cleared for dancing, and the log walls of the rambling old building echoed back the happy voices of those who had ridden in from thirty miles around to attend this dance which courtly, white-bearded old Colonel Corlett, of the Circle C, was giving to his range neighbors. And Clara Mansfield, slim and dark and lovely, closed her eyes for a moment and drifted with the music, finding in this dance with a man she did not know a thrill that was new and strange.

She opened her eyes again, listening to a softly drawling voice that held an odd, caressing note.

"They tell me you are the schoolmar'm," her partner was saying. "Lately I've been regretting my lack of education—"

He wasn't handsome, she thought suddenly; his features were too irregular for that—but his shoulders were solid, and the darkly bronzed face above them was rugged and strong, and his lips had a twist of humor. In the depths of the gray eyes looking down at her was a glint of something deep and disturbing. She put her head back and laughed up at him.

"You should read some good books," she said.

"That's it," he agreed. "Of course I'd have to brush up my reading. And I thought that if you could spare me an hour or so every evening—"

"*Every* evening?" she echoed.

"I've lost a lot of time. Ever since I first saw you—"

"Ten minutes ago," she put in, her eyes laughing.

"I've been thinking about all the years I've been lost," he went on. "I'm referring to my education, of course."

"Of course," she said. "You dance rather well—and you seem to sling around a lot of words."

"I pick up things," he said. "I have always wanted to be a banker or something. Perhaps, after we've brushed up my reading and arithmetic and—"

The music swirled around them. Clara closed her eyes and drifted, listening to the soft drawl of his voice. And she thought: Go easy, my girl! You just met this man tonight. Why, you don't even know his name!

That was true. She had seen him for the first time tonight, standing at the living-room doorway, talking to Colonel Corlett. He was taller than most men, and her glance had caught on him and lingered for just an instant—and he had chosen that instant to look at her. Their eyes had caught and held for just a moment; then Colonel Corlett was bringing over the tall stranger.

"Clara, this man gives me no peace. He has gone so far as to threaten me with bodily injury if I don't present him at once. And so—"

But Bill Minor, of the Slash Bar crew, had chosen that moment to emit a cowboy yell of sheer exuberance, the orchestra had slashed into the opening bars of *Buffalo Gals,* and Clara had missed the tall man's name. Then they were dancing together.

"It would be more convenient if I knew your name," she murmured. "I missed it. There was so much noise—"

"It's Buck," he said.

"I mean—your last name?"

"Call me Buck," he said. "I never use my last name. I'll make a deal with you—you call me Buck and I'll call you Clara, and we'll call it square."

"But—"

"Now about my education," he said, grinning down at her.

There the matter stood, for the stranger refused to discuss it further. The dance ended all too soon, and he led her back to her seat.

"The next dance?" he asked.

"I'm afraid it's taken."

"The one after that, then," he pleaded. "Remember—we have an awful lot to talk about!"

"Perhaps," she said.

"Buck," he suggested.

His infectious grin drew an answering smile from her.

"Perhaps, Buck," she amended.

SHE had come to the dance with Rupe Bennett and his wife, and as the man who called himself Buck was walking away, she asked Mrs. Bennett about him. But the older woman could add nothing to her knowledge. She had the next dance with Dave Slocum, but that carrot-topped Slash Bar puncher couldn't tell her anything about the stranger, either.

"Never did see the jasper before," Slocum said. "He's a somewhat tough-looking customer, but if he bothers you I'll run him plumb into the desert. Just say the word!"

"It isn't that," Clara said. "I was—just wondering."

"Maybe you're bothering *him,*" Slocum hazarded, and then he guffawed as color washed across her face.

After that Clara let it go, making no further effort to learn the stranger's name. She was enjoying her flirtation with him, and the fact that she did not know who or what he was added a certain piquancy to the adventure. At midnight they ate supper together in the long, low Circle C dining room. And hours later, with dancers and musicians still carrying on with unabated zeal, he came to sit beside her.

"The dance will be breaking up soon," he said. "I have arranged to borrow a team and buggy from Colonel Corlett. They're waiting in the yard now."

"That's very nice, but—"

"I thought perhaps you would let me drive you home."

She faced him frankly. "I'm afraid I can't. I came with Mr. and Mrs. Bennett and—"

"I know." Airily he dismissed the Bennetts. "Colonel Corlett is a gentleman of the old school. He has savvy, and he has promised to speak to them. We have so much to talk about—books, and pencils, and things like that. You see, I've lost so much time—"

Her dark eyes sparkled. "You are losing none now," she said. . . .

WITH gray light spreading out thinly above ragged mountain peaks, they rode toward Rupe Bennett's Rafter T spread, where Clara boarded during the school term. The dusty road was a thin, silvery ribbon stretching out before them, and the beat of horses' hoofs made a soft refrain, while the man beside her talked of many things in his lazy, drawling voice. Presently the words died and they drove toward the brightening dawn in contented silence.

Then Clara opened her eyes with a start to find that she had dropped to sleep against his shoulder. They were driving into the Rafter T yard. He helped her from the buggy and walked with her to the porch.

"Let me thank you for a wonderful evening," he said.

She leaned against a white porch post and smiled down at him sleepily. "It was fun," she said.

"That name that was bothering you," he said. "It's Carlyle—Gregg Carlyle."

Clara Mansfield stared at him in sudden horror. "Not—not Gregg Carlyle?"

"The same. Buck to my friends."

"You're—Salino's new marshal?"

He nodded cheerfully. "I take over on the first." He draped his big lean frame negligently against the porch railing. "Which is neither here nor there. I have been wondering, if I rode this way tomorrow night—"

She could only stare at him. "Not—not tomorrow night," she whispered.

"Tuesday night, then?"

"Not Tuesday night," she said suddenly, vehemently. "Not ever—not ever again!"

She left him standing there, staring up at her. She found the door and jerked it wide, and went into the house. Through the long hall she saw huge Rupe Bennett stirring up a fire in the kitchen range, but she didn't stop. She ran upstairs to her room and sank down on the bed.

He was Gregg Carlyle.

SHE got up presently. Early morning light was streaming through her bedroom window. On her dresser was a folded paper, a copy of last week's *Salino Times.* Her eyes turned to an item on the front page:

NEW CITY MARSHAL

Mayor Jason Hardaman announced today that Gregg Carlyle, well-known Southwestern lawman who attained wide repute by breaking up the notorious Abe Dillon outlaw gang, has accepted the post of marshal of Salino and will take over his new duties on the first of the coming month. Only the fact that Mayor Hardaman and Carlyle were friends in Texas enabled Salino to secure a lawman of this caliber. It is to be hoped—

She put the paper aside and crossed to the window, watching shadows shorten across the range. She turned at last to a trunk in the corner of the room, threw the lid wide, reached inside, and brought up a small wooden box. There was a tiny lock, and a key dangling from a string. She opened it.

Once the box had been filled with candy. It held trinkets now, souvenirs. Half a dozen letters, bound together with a piece of ribbon. A man's gold watch. A picture of a boy of eighteen or so, posed beside a horse. A newspaper clipping.

She took the clipping out and spread it across her knee:

COWBOY KILLED

In a shooting affray which took place in front of the Alamo Bar last night, Deputy Sheriff Carlyle shot and killed Pete Minden. Minden, who appears to have been a range tramp, had been drinking and making trouble in the saloon earlier in the evening, and Deputy Carlyle was called on to take him into custody. As the deputy approached the barroom, Minden staggered through the swinging doors, brandishing a revolver, and when Carlyle called upon him to surrender, he immediately opened fire. Deputy Carlyle dropped the would-be badman with a single shot.

Clara Mansfield folded the frayed clipping and put it back in the box. It had happened a long time ago, and most of the pain was gone. She put her head back on the pillow and stared up at the gray paper of the ceiling.

It was queer—queer! Just a little while ago she had thought that last night had been the happiest night of her life. And she had spent it flirting with Gregg Carlyle. . . .

SHE slept well into the afternoon. When she came downstairs at last, the sun was just dropping behind the distant mountain wall, and Rupe Bennett and Duke Hart, Rafter T foreman, were seated on the shaded porch before the house. As she came through the door, Duke Hart looked across at her, and then he spoke to Bennett in a voice ostentatiously casual.

"I reckon from now on there won't be no peace for us boys here at the ranch."

Rupe Bennett, a mountain of a man, sat buried deep in a cowhide-covered easy chair.

"How do you make that out, Duke?" he grunted.

The foreman glanced at the girl covertly. "The way our little schoolmar'm was carrying on last night with the new Salino lawman," he explained. "I reckon that gent will spend most of his spare time underfoot here on the porch. It's going to make it mighty—"

She turned on the foreman angrily. "Don't be a fool, Duke!" she snapped. "I never want to see him again!"

Duke grinned up at her. "I beg your pardon, honey. Maybe I jumped to conclusions—I ain't no great shakes as a jumper. Only I sorta thought, after last night—"

"I didn't know who he was—last night," she said.

Rupe Bennett was tamping tobacco into a pipe. "He must be all right, that Carlyle," he said. "Jase Hardaman was telling me about him a month ago, when they decided Salino needed a new marshal. He was telling me how this Carlyle gent broke up Abe Dillon's gang of bank robbers. They had stuck up a bank in some little Texas town, and they killed a

couple of people, and this Carlyle took after them. He was a deputy sheriff then. He trailed Abe Dillon for four months, and then it was a shoot-out and both of them were wounded. But he snapped the bracelets on Dillon and brought him in to jail. Hardaman says that at the trial, Dillon stood up and swore that he'd kill Carlyle some day, before he cashed in his chips."

Duke Hart spun a cigarette away. "What happened to this Dillon hombre?"

"He was sentenced to hang. But he broke jail. Happened a year or so ago. He killed a guard and got away, and Hardaman says they never did catch up with him again."

"He swore he'd kill Carlyle, eh?"

"That's the way Hardaman tells it. Of course, it was just wild talk, but this Dillon is still running loose—"

Clara sat on the porch steps and looked at the blue of distant mountains and tried to close her ears to the words. She didn't want to hear about Gregg Carlyle—she wanted only to forget that he existed. And yet, after last night, it was hard to get the big lawman out of her thoughts.

IT DIDN'T grow easier with the slow passage of the days. In the little log schoolhouse where she taught, there were times when his face would come between her and some pupil reciting at the blackboard, and she would remember how he had joked about his education. There were nights when she tried to sleep and found herself lying wide awake, remembering the infectious, boyish smile of the big man who lived by his guns. It was something she couldn't help, she concluded finally. Time would heal that deep, terrible ache. Time. . . .

There came that Saturday afternoon when she rode into Salino to match a piece of dress goods for Mrs. Bennett. She had left her horse at the hitch-rail before the Boston store, and she was inside comparing patterns with old Sam Moss, the proprietor, when half a dozen yelling horsemen roared down the street in a swirling cloud of dust. Moss glanced through the door as the riders swept by.

"Curt Fennel's Anvil outfit, from beyond the Salt Flat," he explained. "They trailed a beef herd in yesterday. A tough crowd—they used to shoot up the place every time they came to town!" The little merchant shrugged and turned back to his bolts of cloth. "Things are different—we have a good marshal now. *He'll* take care of them!"

Later, when Clara had completed her purchases, she gathered the parcels in her arms and crossed the sidewalk to where her horse waited patiently at the rail. She was tying packages to the saddle when she heard a roaring voice. She glanced down the street, and saw that four men had surged through the swinging doors of the Last Chance saloon, not fifty feet away, to gather in a little knot on the wooden sidewalk. Another man was standing alone on the sidewalk, between her and the four punchers—and although his back was turned, she recognized him instantly. It was the marshal of Salino.

A huge, red-headed cowboy shook clear of his companions and stood staring at the marshal. "So you're the new town tamer?" he said sneeringly.

Although the marshal was thirty feet away, Clara could hear his drawling voice distinctly.

"I'm the city marshal," he said.

"You know something, feller?" the redhead said. He was drunk enough to be ugly; he wasn't too drunk not to be dangerous. "I always did crave to collect me a lawman's scalp."

The marshal of Salino began to walk toward him. "You'll never have a better chance than now, Red."

Red's three companions had faded

back into a doorway. He stood alone, his legs braced, his shoulders hunched forward and a snarl across his face. Very plain it was that he was out for trouble.

"Damn you—stand where you are!" he roared. "Or else go for your gun!"

The marshal's voice was soft. "I'll wait for you, Red."

All the time he was moving forward, shuffling toward the red-headed puncher like a cat closing in on a mouse.

"You had your warning, feller!" the redhead snarled, and his hand smashed for the black gun at his hip.

The gun never cleared the leather. The marshal of Salino covered the last few feet in a catlike leap, and steel made a bright arc in the air. The barrel of the marshal's gun crashed against the redhead's temple and knocked him completely across the wooden sidewalk, leaving him sprawled in the white dust of the street.

Sunlight played on the marshal's back. He stood in the center of the wooden sidewalk, the gun shining in his hand. His voice was still a drawl.

"Do any more of you boys crave to collect a lawman's scalp?" he said.

A hook-nosed, bow-legged puncher moved from the shelter of the wall. "Forget it, mister," he said. "You're all right. Red was drunk. You won't have no more trouble with him."

The marshal nodded. "That's it—he was drunk. Likely he'll feel different, once he sobers up. Get him outa town."

He turned his back on them deliberately and walked away.

HE WAS abreast of Clara before he saw her, standing quiet and motionless beside her horse. He spun on a heel and came toward her, a slow grin breaking through the bleak harshness of his face.

"Clara!" he said. "Sa-ay, I'm mighty glad to see you, lady! We got some things to talk about!"

She looked up at him. There was no strength in her. Just a moment ago she had been dreadfully afraid. She hated herself for it now, but she knew that she had been afraid that this big, smiling man might be hurt.

"What is there—to talk about?" she asked.

He was standing at the edge of the sidewalk now, smiling down at her. "A whole lot of things," he said. "The other night, for one. What did I do to offend you?"

"Nothing," she said coldly.

He studied her thoughtfully. "This isn't the time or place to tell you, Clara," he said slowly, "but I guess I fell in love with you that night. I don't know why—nothing like that ever happened to me before—but that's the way it is, and I can't help it now. That's why I'd like to know what I did that was wrong."

She wanted to get away; she *had* to get away. "It wasn't anything you did," she said. "It's what you are."

He scowled. "*What* am I?"

"You're a killer," she said defiantly. "You wear a badge and you've got the law behind you, but you're a killer just the same! You're just like any outlaw living by a gun!"

She watched his face turn darker.

"Somebody's got to deal out the law, Clara," he said soberly. "Somebody's *got* to wear the gun."

She had to get away from him, away from this sunlit street. She had a feeling that people were watching them.

"Do you remember—Pete Minden?" she asked huskily.

He rubbed a lean jaw musingly and shook his head. "I don't place the name right now."

"You see?" she cried bitterly. "You killed him, down in a little town in Texas—and now you don't even remember his name! Oh, you were in the clear! You were the law and you

wore a badge, and he was just a cowboy on a spree. But you killed him just the same!"

"Where does this—this Minden fit in this business?"

"Nowhere!" she cried. "He's dead—he doesn't count at all! He was wild, and he got in trouble, and he had to change his name—but he wasn't a gunfighter—he wasn't any match for a man like you. And you killed him!"

She was shaking with anger now. She jerked reins free and swung into saddle and sat there looking at the marshal.

"His right name was Pete Mansfield," she said. "He was my brother. Now, perhaps, you'll understand why I don't want to talk to you—why I don't want to see you—ever again!"

She whirled her horse then and left him standing on the sidewalk. And that night, for no reason that she could understand, Clara cried herself to sleep.

BUT she cried no more after that. The whole thing, she concluded wearily, was just an ironic joke. Gregg Carlyle had fallen in love with her at a dance; she had his word for that. And now she was learning that she had fallen in love with him. In love with *him!*

It ended there. It had to end. The face of her dead brother would be forever between her and the man she loved, and there was no help for it. She drifted with the days. She taught A-B-C's in the little one-room schoolhouse, and on days when there was no school, she saddled her horse and took long rides across the range. The school term was nearly over, and she decided that she would try for another school in another town. Meanwhile, she stayed away from town, and did not see the marshal again.

Then, one Saturday morning, she took her pony from the stall and curried and brushed him until his sorrel coat gleamed like flame in the sunshine. She was cinching a saddle into place when she heard the pound of hoofs. She looked up to see two youngsters, riding bareback like little Indians, come tearing up the lane. Rupe Bennett's children. They pulled their ponies down before her, hitting the ground in a cloud of dust.

Buddy Bennett was running toward her. Buddy was ten. Millie, his sister, two years younger, was right at his heels. Buddy's eyes were smudges of blue in a freckled face.

"Miss Mansfield!" he cried. "Miss Mansfield—there's going to be a robbery!"

She smiled down at him. This was another game, of course. "Tell me about it, Buddy. Am I the victim?"

"No—no!" The boy was stuttering in his excitement. "This is honest, Miss Mansfield! We heard them talking. Some men are going to rob the bank in Salino!"

She stared at the excited youngster, suddenly alert, her eyes searching. "You heard them talking, Buddy?"

"Sure! We were playing Indian, Millie and me. And we saw smoke coming from old man Grossman's cabin on Payne Creek. He's been gone a long time, you know. So we hid our ponies and sneaked up on him. We were going to tie him to the stake." The boy grinned suddenly, sheepishly. "We were just playing. But it wasn't old man Grossman at all."

"Who was it, Buddy?"

"I don't know. Me and Millie sneaked up to the window. There were three men in the cabin. I didn't know them at all. We were peeking in at them, and heard them talking. They were talking about robbing the bank in town."

Little Millie could hold back no longer. "And they're going to kill the marshal, too!" she cried. "They said so!"

"Kill the—the marshal, Millie?"

"Sure!" Buddy took up the tale again. "One of them said, 'I'll kill that

damn Carlyle if it's the last thing I ever do!' His name was Abe something, and he was cussing like everything. We were afraid to go, so we just stayed there and listened, and they're going to rob the bank!"

"Where are these men now, Buddy?"

"They got on their horses and rode away. They went toward town. Then Millie and me hit for home as fast as we could ride."

Abe something! Clara remembered that afternoon when she had sat on a shaded porch and listened to Rupe Bennett and Duke Hart talk about Gregg Carlyle. Bits of that conversation came back now, fragments that had lodged deep in her memory.

Abe Dillon had led a band of bank robbers. Abe Dillon had stood up in court and sworn that he would kill Gregg Carlyle some day. Abe Dillon had killed a guard and broken jail and escaped. . . .

There wasn't a man about the place. Mrs. Bennett was somewhere within the house, but Rupe Bennett and his three punchers had ridden away that morning, and she didn't know where to find them now. And Abe Dillon—if it *was* Dillon—and two men were riding into town to rob the bank. To kill Gregg Carlyle.

She spoke swiftly. "Buddy, you find your father or Duke Hart. They're somewhere about the ranch. Tell them what you've told me—and tell them I'm riding on to warn the town."

IT WAS six miles to town. Clara made it as fast as the horse could travel, and the shining red coat was covered with foamy lather when she turned the big sorrel into the main street of Salino. She saw then that she had made it in time, that nothing had happened yet, for on the wide and empty street there was no sign of excitement.

The bank was a long stone building standing apart at the edge of the business section. There was no hitch-rack there, so she turned in alongside the livery stable and left the sorrel there. She started for the bank.

She was halfway across the street before it struck her suddenly that there might be another explanation for the quietness of the town. She saw three horses anchored to a wagon in a vacant lot beyond the bank, and she saw a man crouching down at the corner of the building. Then she saw light dancing on the bright barrel of the rifle in his hand, and through the big windows of the bank, she saw men standing in stiff, unnatural postures, their hands above their heads.

Strength left her for an instant. She had reached the very center of the wide street. She had started for the bank, and now she didn't know what to do. She knew that the man crouching at the corner of the bank was watching her, but she never looked at him. She set her jaw and kept on. She had forty feet of space to cross, and it seemed to stretch on and on, endlessly. But she made it safely. When she came to an open door and dark corridor beyond, she flung herself inside and slammed the door behind her.

She was in half-darkness in a narrow hallway, with a staircase leading to the second floor of the bank building before her. She grabbed the stair railing and clung weakly for a moment. Outside, a gun broke out in a crashing fusillade of shots.

She turned and ran upstairs. Ahead of her was a closed door with a brass sign at the top. This was Doctor Hoban's office. She opened the door and went inside. The office was empty. On a little table was a man's hat, and beside the hat lay a double-barrelled shotgun, open at the breech, together with an oil can and a couple of dirty rags.

A curtain billowed in the breeze, and she crossed the office and knelt

at an open window. She looked down on a street empty and deserted, on a town held in the spell of an ominous silence. No firing now; no sign of life anywhere.

Then the silence was shattered by the crashing sound of guns, and in the quiet street below, all hell seemed to burst at once. A man broke from the shadows of a doorway and raced across the street. At his back, half a dozen guns began stuttering in rapid fire, and Clara's heart seemed to stop beating for an instant, for the man charging across the street was Gregg Carlyle.

He was running forward, a blazing gun in each hand, and, running, he passed out of her sight. She saw that he was cutting around a corner of the bank, and all at once she knew what he must be trying to accomplish—knew that he must be trying to place himself between the outlaws in the bank and the horses which they had cached for their getaway.

She had to know what was happening!

SHE ran across the office, and as she ran, she reached out and grabbed the open shotgun from the table. There was no conscious thought behind the act. She knew that the shotgun was empty; knew that it was useless. And she knew that the man she loved was playing out a game of life and death in a vacant lot below.

There was a window, closed. She jerked it wide, leaned far out on the sill. In the crashing roar of the guns, the opening window made no sound. She saw a man lying face down in dust in the shadow of the building, and her heart stopped dead in her breast. Then she saw Gregg Carlyle. Down on one knee, still unharmed, the marshal of Salino was cramming bullets into an empty gun.

Even as the girl leaned far out on the sill, a lone man broke from the side door of the bank, running for the horses that still stood tied to wagon wheels. He stopped, seeing Gregg Carlyle. He was behind the marshal, and the marshal did not know that he was there. Clara saw the bright gleam of metal in the bandit's hand. She watched a gun come up.

She shoved the useless shotgun across the sill. The outlaw was right below her as she swung the gleaming twin barrels into line. She knew the gun was empty, and she knew all she could do was bluff. The man was right below her. She wanted to scream aloud, but her voice was clear and calm.

"You better drop that gun," she said. "I'll shoot your head right off your shoulders if you don't drop that gun!"

The bandit turned slowly, gun in hand. He looked at the yawning muzzles of the shotgun, not ten feet from his head. He was a big, beard-stubbled man, and she could see the snarling fury spread across his face. But the shotgun was very close.

"Drop the gun!" she said. "Drop it, or I'll kill you!"

She was so close to him that she could see the small, crescent-shaped scar curving across the bridge of his nose. She knew he was weighing chances then, wondering if he could beat her to the shot. In the end, he shrugged and let it go. The gun slipped from his fingers.

"You win, sister," he rasped.

Only then did the marshal of Salino know what had happened. He turned and saw the tableau at his back. Then he came toward them slowly. His gun was loaded now. He looked up at the girl with the shotgun.

"I'm obliged, Clara." He looked at the outlaw. "It's Abe Dillon, isn't it?" he said.

"I don't know you, mister," the trapped man snarled.

"Don't you, Dillon?" Cold as ice was the marshal's voice. "Don't you,

now? Maybe I can prod your memory. Once, quite a little while back, there was a bank robbery down in a little town in Texas. Enger, Texas, it was. You and your crowd were sticking up a bank, Dillon. An old gent who didn't know what was going on started into the bank, and you shoved a gun against his ribs and pulled the trigger. He died without ever knowing what was happening. Remember that, Dillon?"

"What if I do?" the outlaw rasped.

"That old man was my dad, Dillon. And I've been hoping ever since that I'd meet up with you."

He looked at Clara then. His face was like a mask, but his voice was drawling still. "Please—keep out of this, Clara."

She didn't know what he had in mind. "This gun is empty," she said. "It isn't any good."

The big marshal nodded. "That is as it should be. This is a little matter between Abe Dillon and me." His eyes turned back to Dillon then. "I'll give you an even break, Dillon. That's more than you gave my dad."

His eyes locked with the eyes of the gunman.

Then, deliberately, the marshal let his gun drop to the ground!

That was all Abe Dillon asked. A getaway horse was waiting, and all that stood between him and escape was this man who had dropped his gun. With an oath, the outlaw went to his knees, stabbing for the black gun he had dropped. But the marshal of Salino stooped and swept his Colt up in a swift, easy motion, and a bullet drove Dillon back on his haunches just as his gun was coming up, and a second bullet left him lying face-down in the sunlight. . . .

CLARA said, "I thought you were Gregg Carlyle!" And to her amazement, the big marshal laughed. He laughed down at her as if he had not a care or a responsibility in the world.

"Carlyle," he said finally, "is sixty years old, if he's a day. He was wearing a lawman's badge before I was born! But I was fair with you, Clara —I *told* you my name was Buck. It is. Buck Owens. Joseph P. Owens, if you want the handle complete. So there it is—you'll have to get used to it!"

Most of the excitement was over now. The third and last member of Abe Dillon's outlaw crew had tried for escape through the front door of the bank, and he had died in a hail of lead, died on the wooden sidewalk just beyond the door.

"But I don't understand!" Clara said.

"It *is* kinda complicated," Buck Owens said. "Abe Dillon had sworn to kill Carlyle, and I was riding Dillon's trail. Carlyle had to go East for an operation—he had a bullet stuck against his spine. It meant a long time in the hospital. Carlyle had this offer of a job as marshal here, so he agreed, since he couldn't take it, to lend me both his name and his reputation. Mayor Hardaman knew about it, and I was going to tell you, only you never gave me a chance. We figured maybe Dillon might drop in some day to try to make good on his threat. It turned out just that way."

She said, "You've got to give up this business. I mean, wearing a badge—toting a gun—"

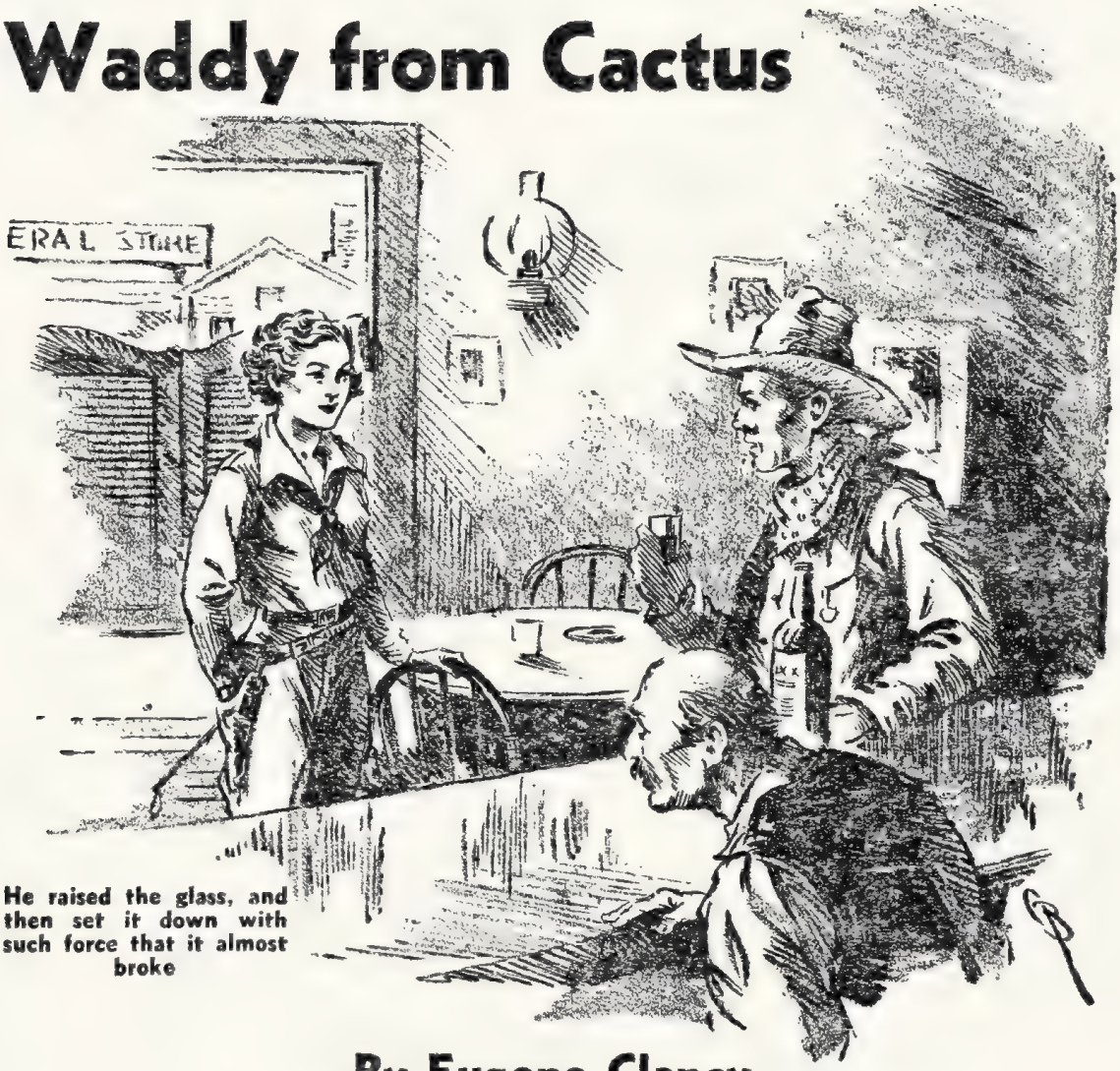
He laughed again. "Lady, I own a cow ranch down in Texas, and I'm six months behind in my work now! I'll turn the badge over to them tonight. All that worries me is—how long will it take you to pack?"

She couldn't speak at once.

"How about it?" Buck said.

Clara smiled shakily. "Well," she said, her eyes shining up at him, "there's one thing sure, Buck—it won't take me long. Not long at all!"

Waddy from Cactus



He raised the glass, and then set it down with such force that it almost broke

By Eugene Clancy

Alone, her ranch sold over her head—Jane Hilton defied her guardian and chased down a big, reckless waddy, because—

HOKE KENDALL, the Silver Gulch lawyer, Justice of the Peace, and general legal factotum, shifted nervously in his chair as he spotted Jane Hilton turning off the main trail and heading for the Circle H ranch house. His strong teeth clamped down on the black cigar between his thin lips. Damn the girl! She'd been keeping away, refusing to meet the new owner of the Circle H or to have anything at all to do with the deal—and now she had to show up at the last minute! Not that she could do anything about it now, for the deal had been closed yesterday afternoon in town. Curt Donnigan's check was deposited in the bank to Hoke Kendall's credit as sole trustee and guardian—but you never could tell about these things.

For a man with money enough to buy a ranch, this Curt Donnigan was surprisingly young—and Jane Hilton was easily the prettiest girl in this whole section of the Southwest. It

was too bad, because the good-looking but rather grim-jawed young Donnigan had announced that he was riding back to Cactus within the hour, and would not come to take over actual possession of the ranch for perhaps a month or more. He had insisted on riding out for a final look at the house. They had done that and now were about to leave—and Hoke had done his best to keep him from meeting Jane. A few months later they could meet and be damned, but right now it might be embarrassing. Donnigan seemed a level-headed young cuss, but a girl as pretty as Jane Hilton might upset things. . . .

Hoke and Donnigan were sitting on the veranda now, their mounts tethered to the rail at the foot of the steps. He saw the young waddy's gray eyes light with warm admiration as Jane dismounted and came swiftly up the steps, a distracting little figure in gleaming boots, corded riding breeches, a silk blouse with a flaring bandanna knotted loosely at the deep V of the wide collar, and a white Stetson pulled rakishly over a mass of short golden hair that curled and whispered about her cheeks. The businesslike six-gun in a worn holster buckled at her slim waist failed to detract from the picture.

Jane glanced briefly from one man to the other, but her blue eyes were unsmiling. She gave them just the slightest nod as they stood up. She was about to pass quickly into the house, but suddenly the big waddy put a detaining hand on her arm. Something in his manner, rather than the touch on her arm, made her turn and look up at him quickly.

"Just a minute, Miss Hilton," he said, his voice pleasantly vibrant. "If you don't mind, I'd like to have a talk with you. Fact is, I rode out this morning hopin' to meet you."

Hoke Kendall blinked, and his thin lips twitched. The shrewd lawyer thought quickly. He'd best jump in and handle this situation pronto, before it got out of hand. Maybe he could get Donnigan away in a few minutes, with no harm done.

"This is Curt Donnigan, Jane," he said, with an easy, engaging smile. "The new owner. Glad you showed up —I wanted the pleasure of introducing you two." Hoke laughed pleasantly. "I couldn't make her believe that you weren't some tobacco-chewin' old crab or an Eastern slicker! And you sure put one over on me, Donnigan, sayin' you wanted to ride out just to have another look at the house!"

"And you sure put one over on *me,*" the waddy cut in, a certain edge to his voice that made both Jane and the lawyer start. "You gave me to understand that your ward didn't live here, and was around twelve years old. If I hadn't got talkin' with some folks in Silver Gulch this morning before you showed up, Kendall—"

"It doesn't matter," said Jane, her cheeks flushing under his steady gaze, her blue eyes angry. "You bought the ranch anyway, didn't you—without troubling yourself to find out about me! I hope you will like the Circle H, Mr. Donnigan, and find it a profitable investment." She turned her angry eyes on the lawyer. "If Mr. Donnigan wants to take immediate possession, he is free to do so. I'm moving out at once. Ash Miller has been fixing up that cabin in Thunder Canyon for me. It's ready now."

"Ash Miller!" Kendall exclaimed, his smile changing to a quick frown. "Look here, Jane—this won't do! And if you think I'm going to let you stay up there in that lonely cabin. . . . So that's what you've been so busy about! You're going to stay right here, young lady, until I arrange for you to go to your uncle's in 'Frisco."

"I've had quite enough of your guardianship, Hoke Kendall!" said Jane, her blue eyes flaming at him. "You've sold the roof over my head,

and now I'm going to do as I please! And I give you fair warning not to try to stop me or interfere with me. I merely came back for some personal belongings, and—"

JANE'S lips were trembling. She whirled to the door and darted into the big living room, before they should see the tears suddenly glistening on her long silken lashes. She almost had told them that she had come back for a last look around the old house in which she had been born —her home. She had not expected to find them here, or anybody but the old Chinese cook.

Dashing her sleeve across her wet eyes, she went quickly upstairs and into her own room, the room she'd taken such pride in rearranging that first year she came back from the 'Frisco school to which her father had sent her. And each vacation she'd added something to it, making it her own, with pretty, feminine things. Old Dan Hilton had pretended to snort and glare, but he'd sneak up at night when she was asleep, touch the golden head on the pillow, swallow the hard lump in his throat—and place two or three more gold pieces on the dainty new dresser. It was old Dan's way of givng her ample money to buy all the "highfalutin' gimcracks" she wanted.

And then came that telegram to the school. Old Dan had been thrown from a galloping horse, and had never recovered consciousness. Afterwards came the disconcerting discovery that for some unknown reason, and without consulting her, Dan Hilton had made Hoke Kendall sole executor and her guardian. Hoke was rated a most capable and efficient lawyer, and his personal reputation seemed good, but Jane had never liked him. But she could do nothing about it. She was only eighteen—and to make it worse, most people in Silver Valley made it quite plain that they thought Dan Hilton had done the right thing, for Dan never had let her have anything to do with the running of the ranch. Folks smiled when she tried to make them understand that she was still a range girl at heart, and the Circle H was very precious to her.

And now the Circle H was gone. She fought and pleaded with Hoke to let her try her hand at running the spread. Perhaps he was right, that it hadn't been making money for a long time and that it would make even less if he placed the running of it in her hands. But to *sell* it!

JANE sank down on the dainty cover of the bed. She put her face down in her hands and for a moment let the tears come, for there was no one to see. Hoke Kendall had licked her. Hoke Kendall, who thought of a ranch only in terms of its earning power. It just didn't seem possible, somehow, that this house, this room, was no longer hers. But she wasn't going to 'Frisco. Uncle Seth was a drunken old scoundrel—as Hoke Kendall well knew. But what was she going to do? She couldn't live up there in Thunder Canyon for the rest of her life!

This man—this Curt Donnigan—obviously he was some cowpoke who'd saved his money to buy a ranch, and having got it, he wasn't going to let go of it. Jane knew his type. Easy-going on the surface, but hard as nails underneath.

Grimly, she carried the bag to the new dresser. There were some things she'd left there to the last. Hastily she swept them into the bag, and went downstairs, clutching the top of the bag in her left hand. She half-expected to see the old Chinaman, Ling Fong, waiting for her. But he was not there. She felt hurt for an instant. Still, perhaps he didn't have the heart to see her just now.

She thrust open the screen door and started quickly across the ve-

randa. Then she found the big waddy confronting her. She was sure that his expression had been grim and forbidding, his eyes bleak as he turned to her, but now he was smiling down at her. For an instant, before she caught herself, Jane almost returned his smile.

"If you please, Mr. Donnigan," she said, "I'm in no mood to talk, and there's really nothing to say."

"I've got somethin' to say, Miss Hilton," he said, his smiling eyes holding her there, stopping her from ducking past him. "I'll make it short. I'm in a hurry to get back to Cactus, where I've a lot of business to tend to. Seein' that you must know all about this spread, I've been wondering how I could come here and look after this ranch, and take care of a lot of other interests I have at the same time, and I'm making you an offer. I want you to act as my manager here—take entire personal charge, perhaps for quite a spell. I want you to start building up this spread, new stock, hands, repairs—all that. You'll know what to do, and how to do it. You'll find an ample drawing account in the Silver Gulch bank. Your salary will be two hundred a month and expenses. I want you to start right now, and if anything special comes up, you can write me at the Cactus Hotel. You'll do me a great favor by accepting the job, for I haven't anybody else I'd trust with it right now, and I'm a stranger in these parts. How about it?"

FOR a moment Jane could only stare at him, her emotions in a turmoil. Manager of the Circle H—entire personal charge—ample money to make the repairs and improvements, so much needed! He seemed to mean it. But it was too good to be true—it must be just another of Hoke Kendall's schemes! He'd rather have her here than up in Thunder Canyon, free of his domination—

"Thanks, Mr. Donnigan," she said quickly, striving to keep her voice steady, cool. "It's a very tempting offer, but I'll have to decline it. I've made my plans. Mr. Kendall will be able to get you a good manager or foreman."

Jane

"Of course!" said Hoke Kendall. "Why, why—you should have told me what you had in mind, Donnigan! Suppose we mount and ride, and waste no more time! I know the very man for you!"

"I reckon you do," said Curt, in a tone that made Jane catch her breath. There was an odd quirk to his lips and his eyes were bleak as he turned them on the lawyer. "As I told you a minute ago, Kendall, I don't like this setup at all. There's something mighty funny about it, and I'm not riding anywhere till I have a good talk with Miss Hilton—alone!"

Jane looked at Hoke Kendall and saw him change color, saw an ugly glint in his dark eyes, and her heart gave a bound. Now she was sure of one thing, at least! Hoke Kendall was *not* in on this. The big waddy's startling offer was as much a surprise to Hoke as it was to her—and the shrewd, scheming lawyer was furious.

She glanced up at the waddy from under her soft lashes. There was a forbidding frown on his face, but in the back of his eyes she caught that light of warm admiration she'd seen in many men's eyes lately. She flushed. If he thought—but this was no time to question his motives. He was offering her a chance to stay on at the Circle H—actually run it, as she had wanted to for a long time—and both his offer and his manner in making it were strictly businesslike. And he had spoken sincerely. She felt no twinge of humiliation. Of course,

if Hoke Kendall had made her such an offer, she would have slapped his face! But—

Suddenly Jane relaxed. She dropped the saddle bag. She perched herself up on the veranda rail, took off her hat, and shook back her mass of shining hair.

"I've changed my mind, Mr. Donnigan," she said, with a frank smile. "I'm taking the job."

"That's great!" the waddy exclaimed, with a friendly, boyish grin. "Consider yourself hired, Miss Hilton. I'll mail you a contract, along with some ideas for your approval. Mail 'em from Cactus tomorrow." He put his boot on the butt of his cigarette and gave a hitch to his gunbelt, where twin Colts were holstered, and the grim set returned to his jaw. "That's all, Miss Hilton," he added, almost brusquely. "I want to get to Cactus before sundown. Good luck to—"

"Just a minute, Donnigan!" Hoke Kendall burst out. "You're letting the girl make a fool of you! She's still my ward, and I won't allow any such nonsense—"

But the waddy was down the steps and in the saddle. In the space of seconds he was galloping off across the open mesa, heading for the main trail down the valley, without so much as a backward glance at the lawyer. Hoke Kendall made a move to follow, but he changed his mind, and stood there, a dull red flushing his smooth white cheek.

JANE had jumped down from her perch on the rail as the waddy strode down the steps. She was startled, half-resentful at his abrupt and disconcerting leavetaking—and then his reason flashed on her. That was his way of showing both her and Hoke Kendall that there were no hidden strings to his offer!

Jane's heart swelled and her eyes became like stars, as the full meaning of what he had done struck her. He was doing something that not two men in a thousand would do. Knowing that Hoke Kendall would not cancel the sale, he was *giving* her the ranch! Making her manager, with entire personal charge, was merely a gesture—his way of doing it! The gesture of a thoroughbred. He was not coming back. Unless she asked him to, he had no intention of *ever* coming back!

Her hat dropped from her hand as she stood there trying to grasp it. She looked at Hoke Kendall dazedly. She had scarcely heard what the fuming lawyer had said a moment ago, and she spoke her thought, forgetting that Hoke Kendall was not at all likely to appreciate her state of mind. Somehow, the waddy's gesture had swept away all her bitterness. Her own thoroughbred instincts were stirring, throbbing within her.

"I can't let him do it!" she gasped. "I *can't!* And I'm going to tell him so, the big, generous, crazy ranny!"

She sprang for the steps, a vivid, lovely smile playing about her lips, but Hoke Kendall grabbed her roughly and yanked her back up on the veranda. He twisted her around and glared down into her startled, angry eyes.

"Nice bit of play-actin' you and that young slicker put on!" he said, his thin lips taut. "It had me fooled for a minute. But I happen to know that he hails from 'Frisco, where you musta met him. You found out he had money, and thought up this little scheme. You hooked him with those come-hither eyes and got him to buy the ranch for you. You sure fooled me on one thing—you're smarter than I thought you were! But you're not smart enough. I reckon this Donnigan fat-head thinks you're going to marry him. But when I tell him about you and Chet Miller—"

His head jerked back as Jane's hand struck him across the mouth. An oath escaped him and he let go

of her arm. Jane slithered back from him, panting, her eyes blazing at him. She saw that he was about to leap at her, and by instinct, rather than volition, her hand flashed to the holster at her belt and she covered him with her six-gun, her finger twitching on the trigger.

"You make one little move, Hoke," she warned, "and I'll darn well shoot!"

She saw his face go white. "Put up that gun, you little fool!" he gasped. "You don't know what you're doing —that might go off! Put it up, I say! I'm only trying to make you see sense. I reckon I lost my temper. Let's sit down and talk this over, Jane."

"Save your breath, Hoke!" she said. His cringing attitude, his craven words, brought a sudden and healthy reaction in her. She almost laughed. She *had* been a little fool, to let a man like this cause days and nights of worry! If she'd thought of punching his head and pulling a gun on him long ago—why, she would have had him eating out of her hand! And just now she'd actually been frightened!

Instead of holstering the gun, Jane flourished it with sudden gusto. Yet instinct warned her. The man was a coward, but a coward's fury was making him doubly dangerous. She could not resist letting him know exactly what she thought of him—but she gripped the gun, held it steady.

"You're pretty clever, Hoke," she said, "making Silver Valley and even poor Dad believe in you, but you gave the show away just now. You say one word against me, or even try to come near this ranch again, and I'll—I'll ride into Silver Gulch and horsewhip you in public! I can't imagine what nasty, devious game you're playing, and right now I don't care. I've something to say to that waddy and I'm riding after him. Get back there in the corner of the veranda. Dad taught me to hit a bottle without breaking it, so don't try any more funny business or I'll trim your ears!"

She stepped forward—and Hoke Kendall stepped back, his face contorted with both fury and fear. Jane, the gun ready in her hand, backed down the steps. Watching her like a cat, the lawyer swore as he realized what she was doing. Jane was untying his horse from the hitchrack. She gave the animal a slap, sent it galloping off across the mesa. Then she vaulted into her pony's saddle. Hoke Kendall knew that there wasn't another horse at the ranch at the moment.

"Sorry to leave you stranded, Hoke," Jane called up to him, "but I'm taking no more chances with you —and you'd better catch your horse and make yourself plumb scarce before I get back here!"

She dug heels and raced off, thrusting her gun back into its holster, though her heart skipped a beat. She knew he wouldn't dare shoot at her, but he might try to bring down the pony. No shot came, however, and she raced on, bent double in the saddle. She had forgotten to pick up her hat, and in the bright morning sunlight she flashed across the short stretch of open mesa before the house like some little golden sprite of the range, her sunny hair whipping back from her face. The rugged foothills that rose from the narrow valley were close, and in a few minutes she galloped into the winding canyon that led to Silver Gulch.

Curt

JANE expected to see the waddy directly ahead as she rounded the first sharp bend in the canyon trail, but he was not in sight. Her pony, who bore up as well as he could under the name of Wowser—Jane got mad when anybody thought the name funny—Wowser responded valiantly to the impatient proddings of his young mistress. Jane was in the saddle now in more senses than one. Her cheeks were flushed, her glistening blue eyes alive with a spirit that had been missing from them for many a long day. Her thoughts raced. She must catch up with this Curt Donnigan, this Don Quixote of the Range, before he got to Silver Gulch and went into the bank. She must know all about a lot of things, before she permitted this business to go any further.

It occurred to her now that Banker Hensen was a slimy eel—and too close a friend of Hoke Kendall's. That hadn't seemed to matter much before her run-in with Hoke, but now it might be full of sinister meaning. She wanted the job of managing her own ranch more than ever now, but this crazy waddy from Cactus must understand first that she was not accepting left-handed charity, no matter how generous and well-meant—not from him or anybody else. It wouldn't look right, and she wouldn't feel right. The range would seethe with gossip, even though this reckless Don Quixote kept away for a hundred years—which he would. He had *meant* that.

Jane never had learned to be anything but frank, even with herself, and now she flushed crimson as a thought struck her like a ton of bricks. She didn't want that big cowboy to stay away a hundred years—not even a hundred minutes! Perhaps she was utterly shameless, a hussy or something, but—surging emotions were sweeping through her. She didn't have the faintest idea what she would say to him and she didn't care—it didn't matter. She was racing after him because she was afraid he would get away. It wasn't like—well, like it was when she went riding in the moonlight with Chet, Ash Miller's son, and got all sentimental and goofy. This was different—vastly different. She was—well, she was just *gone!*

Curt Donnigan. Even his name was thrilling, and strong. His jaw was like the side of Thunder Mountain, and very likely he ate horseshoes for breakfast, but he could smile, and that smile did things to you. And the mere touch of his hand—

Jane yanked on the reins, pulled Wowser to a slithering, startled halt. They had rounded another bend in the canyon, and still the waddy from Cactus was not in sight. Flushed, her lovely eyes warm and glowing, and yet shy, Jane sat there, devoutly giving thanks that he was *not* in sight. He was crazy, of course, but he might not be so crazy as not to guess what was the matter with her. And he might misunderstand, think her just a silly little fool. That side-of-a-mountain jaw would tighten up—

He must have ridden very fast, been in a frightful hurry to get away. All chance of catching up with him on the open trail was gone; he would be in Silver Gulch by now, talking with that slimy eel, Jared Hensen. Perhaps the best thing for her to do would be to ride back home and get some control of herself, try to think—

Home! That word snapped Jane back to earth. She slid from the saddle and stood with her hand absently caressing Wowser's nose, her toe kicking at the sand of the trail. She was in a jam, all right, and that word home hadn't much meaning any more. A disturbing conviction grew in her. Even if she accepted the waddy's offer, Hoke Kendall would make trouble for her. No, she had no home. The little cabin Ash Miller and his

wife Sally, had fixed up for her was nice, but it made her just a respectable nester. She was actually little better than a saddle-tramp now—and not a very respectable one, either, chasing after a strange cowboy with a grim, granite jaw!

A POUNDING of hooves brought her sharply alert. The rider was coming from Silver Gulch. All Jane's emotions flamed up again. He was coming back! Perhaps he'd had a row with Hensen, but perhaps—well, perhaps he *had* thought her rather nice or something. Fresh panic gripped Jane. She wanted time to think, and he'd be around that bend in a second!

But it was not Curt Donnigan. The rider who bore down on her was a sleek, thin man in "store" clothes, a sombrero pulled down tight over his bald head. Jared Hensen! Jane's pulse leaped. Something out of the ordinary must have happened, for Hensen seldom rode anywhere and there was an ugly expression on his smug face as he pulled up. She knew he disliked her—he was the type of grumbler who hates all young folks just on general principles. Now there was suspicion as well as dislike in his cunning little eyes. He spoke suddenly in a thin, sharp whining voice.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Jane bristled. "I don't see that it's any of your business, Jared Hensen!" she retorted. Her bright head came up and she shook back her hair—but that she looked more devastatingly pretty than ever did not have any effect on the gimlet-eyed banker. Obviously Jared Hensen was fuming over something, greatly upset.

"You'd better keep a civil tongue in your head, young lady!" he grated. "Where's Hoke? That young cuss who bought the Circle H was just in the bank, and he said he left Hoke at the ranch with you. Why isn't Hoke with you? He was—"

"He's chasing his horse—or walking to town," said Jane, eying Hensen steadily and giving a stone a vigorous kick with her boot. Hensen blinked, puzzled.

"Chasing his horse!" he echoed, and then he burst out: "Listen here, you uppity brat! There's something damn funny going on this morning and you'd better answer me straight! I've got to see Hoke at once. Where is he?"

"If you ride on to the ranch, you may find him," said Jane. "And now I'll tell you something, Jared Hensen. I've always suspected that you and Hoke were as thick as thieves, and now I'm sure of it! I don't know what you're plotting, but I'll make it my business to find out!"

"I'VE found out what you and that Donnigan fool have been plotting!" Hensen burst out, casting his habitual reserve to the winds. "And when Hoke hears about it, he'll sure make it hot for you! That big ape threatened me with physical violence when I tried to tell him I couldn't do what he asked. If I'd been able to find the sheriff, I'd have had him arrested!

"So you think you're going to be the *manager* of the Circle H! Boss of the works!" he sneered.

"And how!" Jane grinned. Her eyes danced, and suddenly she gave the stone such a gleeful kick that it shot clear across the canyon. "And Hoke knows about it and is fit to be tied—the same as you are, Mister Hensen! This must be the day for—for crooks and eels to give themselves away and get what they rate! And there's nothing you can do about it, either!"

"I reckon Hoke will do plenty!" said Hensen furiously. "You'll pay for talking like this, Jane Hilton. Hoke is right—you're not safe to have around, with your vicious accusations—and picking up with young slickers—"

"Curt Donnigan is *not* a slicker!" said Jane, her eyes suddenly hot, her hands clenching. "You be on your way, Jared Hensen! And you'd better be back soon, for I'm going to draw a lot of money from your old bank and get the Circle H started up. I'm going to make things hum!"

She stopped, for Hensen was leaning down from his saddle, looking at her with a sneering smile.

"You won't find any money in *my* bank for you," he said. "I told that young cuss I couldn't do it without Hoke's okay, because you're not of age, and Hoke has full charge of the estate—and of *you*. That's when the young fool threatened me. But he went out. And now I'll tell you just what a little fool you are, Jane Hilton. Hoke Kendall doesn't sell ranches without secretly investigating the buyer—that's plain good business sense. I looked up this Curt Donnigan for him. After paying for the Circle H, that waddy hasn't a dollar to his name! Nothing at all left, except credit for a few hundred dollars in the Cactus bank! If you don't believe me, you can find out fast enough for yourself. I reckon *that* will hold you for a spell! If that Cactus hombre ain't a slicker of some kind, he's a bigger fool than you are. Now you'd better come to your senses and ride with me till we find Hoke!"

Jane stood staring up at him. Something told her that what he'd said was true. She looked away, her hand clutching at Wowser's saddle-girth, and her lips trembled. Desperately she tried to think. Bitterness gripped her. That big Cactus waddy, he—he had lied to her! Let her in for sneers and taunts from wretches like Hoke Kendall and Jared Hensen!

But then Jane Hilton's bright head came up and her eyes flashed again. Yes, he *had* lied—lied gorgeously, like the generous, reckless waddy he was! He was broke, but he planned to raise the money somehow, and never let her know! Hoke and his slippery eel didn't understand. Not in a million years would *they* understand a thing like that! And she—she had been about to condemn Curt Donnigan herself, like a mean little idiot!

"Won't do you any good to stand there, Jane," said Hensen, veiled triumph in his tone. "The Cactus cuss is plain no-good."

Jane sprang into the saddle, but the light in her eyes made the banker start.

"I'm riding after him!" she said. "I'm going to see about this, Jared Hensen! You're forgetting that he *is* the new owner of the Circle H, even if he *is* broke!"

"Go ahead—and see what it gets you!" Hensen jeered. "And you won't have to ride far. You'll find him in the saloon, gettin' drunk, like any slicker whose bluff is called!"

Jane could not suppress a gasp. Words rose to her lips, but suddenly she dug heels, and went racing on through the canyon. She looked back once, and saw that the banker was going on in the opposite direction. Her thoughts were a little panicky. In the saloon, getting drunk! Men did that, when things got too much for them. . . .

IN TWENTY minutes or so she galloped into the main street of Silver Gulch. The town was almost deserted. It was early morning and mid-week, with little stirring. The waddy's big gelding was the only mount at the saloon hitchrack. He *was* in there. Jane dismounted and went up the steps quickly, but at the swinging doors she hesitated a moment. She'd never been in the Silver Gulch Saloon, or any saloon. But this was *one* time—

She pushed her way through the doors rather gingerly, giving a quick glance around. Then she felt better. The Cactus waddy, draped against the bar, was the only customer. There

was a bottle and a glass before him, and he was in the act of pouring a drink. He raised the glass, and then set it down with such force that it almost broke. He had seen her in the mirror, and now she was at the bar, standing beside him.

"Curt!" she said, unaware that she was blurting out his first name as if she had known him for years. "What are you doing here? I want to talk with you at once!"

She stopped. He was frowning down at her, and his cheeks were flushed.

"You've had enough to drink!" said Jane.

Curt Donnigan blinked. Jane did not see the twinkle in the back of his eyes.

"I reckon you're right, Jane," he said, pushing the bottle and glass away and flinging a coin on the bar. The watery-eyed little bartender stood back, his mouth open, utterly stunned at finding Miss Jane Hilton in his saloon. "Let's get outside," said the waddy, and abruptly stalked out to the porch, Jane at his heels.

"Now, young lady," he said, "what in time brings you here? I was just having a snifter before hitting for Cactus. The bank here won't do business with me, but it doesn't matter. I'll make the arrangements through the Cactus bank. Say—you didn't have any trouble with Kendall after I left, did you? The more I think of that jasper, the more I feel like taking him apart!"

"I—I did have a little spat with him," said Jane. She was staring up at him, her brain suddenly working fast, very fast. "He doesn't like my being manager, but he'll get used to it. Curt, I rode in hoping to catch you. Are you *sure* you need a manager?"

"Surest thing you know!" said Curt Donnigan, a world of easy assurance in his voice. "We're going to make that ranch hum!"

"Listen," said Jane. "I'm worried about—about the *money*."

"Let that be the last of your worries!" said the waddy. He frowned a little. "I did forget to tell you, though, that there may be a little delay—about a week. I—I forgot about some other payments I've got to make this week in Cactus. But after this week it will be all right. There'll be plenty of money."

He began to roll a smoke. Jane looked away, to hide the joyous light in her eyes. She had a sudden desire to kiss him and tell him that it was all right, that everything was all right. Of all the big, gallant liars—!

"If that's all you've got on your mind," he said, a little unsteadily, "I'll be riding."

"Curt," said Jane, getting a grip on herself, "I was just thinking of something. I know you're a very busy man, but—well, I need help and I need it right now. Hoke Kendall is bent on making trouble for me. Once I get things started at the ranch, I'll be all right. But you're the owner, and I think you ought to be here—for a week or so, anyway. Do you—do you think you could arrange to stay that long?"

CURT DONNIGAN did not know that she was holding her breath. He was gazing down at her, and her heart gave a leap, for she was sure that she saw in his eyes that priceless thing that she wanted to see there. But instantly it was gone, if it ever had been there at all. His jaw set and he frowned. He tossed away his cigarette.

"I'll tell you something," he grated. "I was figuring just now on doing that very thing—staying here for a spell. I didn't like the way that bank jasper acted, telling me what I can do and what I can't do with my own ranch! This whole set-up here is getting under my skin. I'd like to see Hoke Kendall so much as touch a hair

of your pretty head. I'm staying, Jane, but first—come here!"

Suddenly he took Jane's hand and led her down the steps. Her lips moved, but no words came. Her heart was pounding. He led her around into the deserted, shadowy alleyway that ran down beside the saloon. In the shadows he stopped, and turned her to face him, his hands on her slim shoulders. She knew he was looking down at her. Her heart going like a trip-hammer, she ventured to raise her eyes. And then he had her in his arms, his lips crushing hers in a kiss that swept her with rapture. It seemed to run through her like a flame. Her lips responded, eagerly. Then, while she clung to him, he was brushing his lips across her hair.

"I tried to go away, honey," he said, raising her face and looking into her shining eyes, "but I just couldn't make it. I thought maybe a few drinks would give me the courage to go, but all the time I knew I was kidding myself. The minute I looked into your eyes back there at the ranch, I knew I'd met *my* girl."

"Oh, Curt!" said Jane. "I knew then, too. I—I loved you the minute I saw you. And—well, I rode here just because—because I was afraid you'd get *away!*"

Curt kissed her again, but he chuckled. Shyly Jane slipped from his arms, but her eyes were dancing. They stood looking at each other for an instant, and then Curt Donnigan came back to earth.

"Listen, honey," he said, a hand on her shoulder, "I reckon a whole lot of things don't matter much now. I'll straighten out Hoke Kendall and that banker. We'll get married pronto, and then see what they think they can do about it! But there's some things I've got to tell you, honey. I know it will be all right with you, but—well, I've a little confession to make to you."

"Let's mount and ride back to the ranch first," said Jane quickly. "This is no place to talk things over. And I want to ride by the back trail—I want to have a talk with you before we run into Hoke or Hensen again."

"I'm not leaving Silver Gulch this morning till I have a showdown with Hoke Kendall!" said Curt grimly. "He'll be back soon, all right. There doesn't seemed to be anybody around—we can talk here. Listen—what did Kendall say after I left?"

JANE told him what had happened at the ranch, and about her encounter with Hensen. But she left out that part about a certain Cactus waddy being broke. It wasn't time yet to tell him she knew that.

"I see," said Curt Donnigan quietly, too quietly. "I've been thinking of something else. I can't understand how your dad, even though he was sick, could leave you at the mercy of a jasper like Hoke Kendall."

"I've often thought of that, too, Curt," Jane said. "Ash Miller told me I should look into it, but what can I do? Hoke Kendall is the whole legal works out here, a leading citizen, and everybody seems to think he is all right. But I do know that he's been trying to force me out of Silver Valley. He wanted the Circle H for himself. I think he sold it only when he became convinced that he couldn't run me out—that I was determined to stay until I came of age."

Jane stopped, puzzled. The waddy from Cactus did not seem to be listening. He was frowning, looking stern. She put a hand on his arm—and looked up at him.

"Curt," she said. "Oh, please—let's not spoil today! Let's ride away from here! We can take up all this horrid business tomorrow!"

Curt Donnigan's boyish smile broke through his frown. He bent and kissed her. "That's a swell idea!" he said, leading the way out of the alley.

Then, as they were about to mount, they stood looking up the street. Hoke Kendall was dismounting in front of his office.

"He must have come by the back trail!" said Jane. "Hensen missed him!"

"Yeah," said Curt grimly. "And now, honey, we'll have a little interview with Mister Hoke Kendall!"

He strode off up the street before Jane could stop him. She followed him. Her heart was thumping, but she knew that they might as well face Hoke Kendall now. He must have seen them, but he gave no sign. He disappeared into his office. When Curt strode in, Jane at his heels, the lawyer was seated behind his big desk, pretending to be absorbed in some papers. He looked up, and forced a smile.

"I reckoned you were on your way to Cactus, Donnigan," he said. "Is there something more I can do for you? And I want a word with you, Jane—after Donnigan goes."

"I'll make it short, Kendall," said Curt, his voice grating a little. "Me and Miss Hilton are getting married today. We're going to live at the Circle H—"

Hoke Kendall leaped to his feet, snarling. *"Married!"* he said. "Listen here, Donnigan! I've had enough of this! This girl is my ward, and you can't marry her without my consent. She's got it in for me for some reason, and she'll go to any lengths to cause me trouble. You can't buck the law, Donnigan. Besides, you're letting a pair of baby eyes make a dumb fool of—"

HOKE KENDALL did not finish. Donnigan's great fist crashed into his mouth and sent him reeling back. He stumbled over his chair, and fell. But he was up instantly, blood and oaths dripping from his snarling mouth. Jane cried out as she saw the gun in his hand. The waddy from Cactus was covering him with a Colt.

"Hold it, Kendall!" said Curt, in that too-quiet voice that made Jane's heart skip a beat. "Now listen! I've got a hunch that you've put over a mighty sharp trick on Miss Hilton. Maybe her dad never made you her guardian at all. If he did, the papers will be right there in that safe of yours. Jane and I want to see them. Get them out!"

Jane saw Kendall go white.

"I'll do no such thing!" he snarled. "You'll do time for this, Donnigan!"

"If you don't get them out pronto," said the waddy, "I won't shoot you, but I sure as hell will beat you to a pulp. Move!"

Jane held her breath. This was a turn of events that she had never expected. Suppose—

Kendall went to the safe. He twirled the dial a few times, and then yanked open the door.

"Stand back!" the waddy commanded. "You make the search, Jane. And don't count on help, Kendall. There ain't anybody around, and you know it!"

"Listen," said Hoke Kendall, his lips working. "It isn't in the safe, if you want to know the truth. It's with a lot of old papers I have stowed away in a safe in my house. I'll get it for you, Donnigan."

"He's lying, Jane," said Curt. "Go ahead and look!"

Jane ran to the safe and began yanking out documents. But in a moment she sprang up, holding three sheets of ordinary pad paper pinned together.

"Here it is!" she cried. "Dad's own paper—I still have the pad home! But—but this isn't Dad's writing at all! It—"

She broke off with a sharp cry as Hoke Kendall leaped on her, almost knocking her down as he grabbed the papers from her hand and tried to tear them up. But he didn't suceed. The waddy, berserk at the sight of Jane being knocked into the wall,

was on him. Dropping the papers, Kendall reached into his coat—and his hand came out with a knife. But before he could strike, Curt brought his heavy Colts down on his head, and Hoke Kendall collapsed, out cold.

Jane was on her feet, the papers clutched in her hand.

"Why, Curt!" she said, reading through them quickly. "The whole thing is a forgery! And—and I know this writing! It's Jared Hensen's! Hoke got that slimy eel to write it! I'm going to take this to Sheriff Ben the minute he comes into town today! Ben isn't like *them*—he'll make it hot for them!"

Her eyes were eager and indignant as she looked up at the man from Cactus.

"We'll tend to all that later, honey," said the waddy, holstering his gun. He looked at her in an odd way. "This makes a lot of things different, Miss Hilton. The Circle H is still yours—Kendall had no right to sell it. And Kendall owes me quite a lot of money. I kinda need it. You see, honey—that confession I was going to make. I—well, the fact is"—the waddy gulped, and he did not see the tender light in Jane's eyes—"you see, I kinda fibbed to you. I'm nothing but a cowpoke who saved to buy a ranch. And I put about my last dollar into the Circle H."

Soft, gentle lips were pressing against his. "That eel Hensen told me, Curt," Jane said. "You—you were gorgeous, lying like that. To—to make things right for me!"

The waddy from Cactus grinned. A warm glow came into his eyes. "Gosh!" he said. "You—you *knew!*"

Jane's eyes sparked.

"Knew?" she said. "Of course I knew! I knew all along!"

Curt blinked. "You knew—when you were looking me straight in the eye back there on the saloon porch?"

"Yes," said Jane, starting to back away. "But—oh, Curt, you looked so dear and funny when you were lying your head off!"

Curt grabbed her, shook her, but her eyes were dancing, and he was grinning. "I reckon it's *you* who needs a manager—and maybe I need a nurse! Say, ain't that the sheriff passing now? Come on!"

"Yes!" said Jane. "But wait! Kiss me first!"

By the Campfire

By ROSS MACKLIN

Something of heaven is dreaming here,

Chiquita—

Something that brings you very near,

Chiquita:

Here where the embers glow in the lonely night,

The soft wind whispers your name—and all is right. . . .

Kentucky Bell

By Norrell Gregory

Ranzy Blair's voice cut like a whiplash: "Go on! Go on! Let that mare run!"

Because of horse racing—her brother's weakness and downfall—was she never to find happiness, even here in the clean wide prairie?

THOSE badlands—those terrible badlands! Slashed and scorched and torn, scoured by the relentless wind and blasted by the brazen sun! Ten mortal days they were, crossing them, and Randall Eddy knew what it meant to be really thirsty. She knew what it was to suffer for want of water.

It was Kentucky Bell that brought them through—Kentucky, the indomitable thoroughbred mare, black as midnight, save for the single blazing star of white on her forehead. For when her bay teammate became so weak and worn that they could scarcely tighten a trace, Kentucky took the whole load. Will Eddy kept hooking her stay-chain shorter and shorter each day, until at last the bay was not even keeping her traces tight; her singletree screamed all day long against the tire of the weak wheel.

The last day was the hottest and the worst, for their spirits were low-

est, and even Kentucky began to show the strain. There was no water that day for man or beast, and Kentucky's brilliant black coat was streaked with dust and alkali. She panted all day long, not even relieved when they stopped for a brief rest at noon. Randall trudged many a weary mile that day, to lighten the load. Randall suffered with her mare.

Will Eddy sat in the wagon seat, the lines held laxly. He never offered to walk to lighten the load, but then, he was so light his weight hardly mattered. He was twenty-five years old—six years older than his sister—but he was little bigger than a fourteen-year-old boy, and his face was almost as innocent of beard. A lot of people had been fooled by that kid-like face and body of Will Eddy's.

Toward the close of that long day, the bad front wheel loosened until Randall could see the spoke tendons pull out of the felloes at every revolution. The loose hub screamed and groaned like something in torment. Will finally stopped cursing the country, and themselves, for leaving a state like Kentucky, and dozed.

But even badlands must eventually end, and these badlands ended, as they had begun, suddenly. To her dying day Randall would never forget the scene that suddenly burst upon her as they crossed a short stretch of flat ground and dropped suddenly over a long sweeping grade.

She was driving then, holding the lines. The lagging bay's singletree was screaming against the tire of the bad wheel, which was also screaming. There it was below her, stretching away to boundless mile on mile of high prairie, with its green grasses running before the wind like surges on an ocean. It quite took her breath away and her first thought was that it was a mirage; it couldn't be real. She leaned over and shook her brother awake.

"Do you see it too, Will?" she asked, in awed disbelief. "Is it real, or am I dreaming?"

Will Eddy awoke and stared, wordless. But Randall saw the ugly cynical down-curve of his mouth lessen and knew he saw it too. Will rubbed his dry, cracked lips. His voice was a rusty croak:

"There's water down there—and grass! Green as Kentucky Bluegrass!" he said.

YES, there was both water and grass. The course of the stream was plainly marked by the fringe of low trees growing along its banks. Through those trees Randall could see the sparkle of water, and beyond the trees she saw a cabin, on the opposite side of the low valley, with smoke climbing straight up from the chimney.

This cabin was log, and the rich brown of those logs contrasted sharply with the pure white of the chinking. About the cabin were grouped other buildings, a corral. Farther on, there was a fenced pasture, with both horses and cows grazing in it.

A rider was in that pasture, a rider whose slimness was evident even at that distance. His horse was a tall, white-footed sorrel, and the horse was patiently following one particular cow, working her slowly but surely toward the corral. It looked very quiet and peaceful, that little ranch spread, and Randall unconsciously squeezed her brother's arm.

"If we had a place like that, Will—if we only did! We can have, Will, if we work hard. The land is here, more than we'll ever need or want. More than *anybody* could ever want!"

The cynical droop made an inverted U of Will Eddy's mouth.

"More than they'll ever *need*," he said, "but not more than they'll ever *want*. All I ask is that this damn wheel will hold out till we reach that

water and grass—and these plugs don't drop dead!"

"Kentucky is not a *plug!*" Randall said sharply. "She's done the work of two the last few days, and she's coming in with her head still up."

Yes, Kentucky's head was still up. But her coat was hot and dry, and a million blood vessels traced their crooked course, plain for the eye to follow. But Kentucky's head would be up until she dropped. She was that kind.

This river was small, but the water was clear and cold. Will Eddy sent the team straight at the short, steep drop down the bank.

Randall said quickly, "Aren't you going to give them a little water before we cross, Will?"

He said, "They can wait till we get across and camp. No sense in takin' them out now to water them."

"We could carry a little to them in a bucket. They're so terribly thirsty, Will!"

"They can stand it if we can," he retorted and sent them down the bank.

THE wagon shoved them on, once started, and they entered the water with a splash. Instantly the team stopped, and fought to reach the water. Both were reined high with gigs on either side of their headstalls. The bay tried to kneel and so reach the water. Kentucky strained against the gigs until the bit all but split her mouth. Will slashed at them savagely; slashed them again and again, and there was a fear mixed with his savagery.

"Get on, you brutes!" he shouted. "Keep goin'." Then, to Randall: "They'll kill themselves if they get their heads down now!"

He forced them into motion with a frenzy of shouts and whip slashes. But at midstream, where the water came above the wagon pole, Kentucky, with one desperate down-drive of her head, broke the gigs and plunged her head into the water up to her eyes. Will slashed and fought her like a wild man, but to no avail. Then he threw down the lines, leaped down on the wagon tongue and ran along it to the mare's head.

Will Eddy

He seized her headstall and tried to raise her head by main strength. Had he been a full-sized, strong man, he might have succeeded. But he wasn't, and his efforts seemingly had no more effect on the mare than would a horsefly tied to her head with a string.

Randall jumped bodily into the water and splashed forward to help. Together they got the mare's head up, but not before she had drunk deeply. Will hurried back to the seat and recovered the lines.

"Get in! Get in!" he snapped. "Let's get the brutes out of here before—"

"Go ahead!" she called. "I'm already as wet as I can be, so I'll just wade the rest of the way. This water is so cold, it's refreshing!"

Will sent the team ahead without another word. Randall stood watching him until he had sent the team out of the water and up the opposite bank. Then she sat down on a rock and took off her shoes and stockings. Her sunbonnet hung from her shoulders by the strings, and glistening jewels of water gleamed in her dark hair.

That full dark skirt was so long that she tripped on it when she tried to walk, so she took it off and carried it, along with her shoes and stockings. She wished she dared to

strip and revel in this clear, cold water.

Will had pulled over the bank and out of her sight. She didn't hurry, but sought the deeper spots, where the quick current boiled sometimes about her rounded bare knees, sometimes higher, where her short underskirt partly masked the lovely white sweep of her thighs.

She came up the wet bank like this, legs bare to the knees and gleaming white against the dark background of the river trees, her wet garments molded against a body that was young and truly beautiful, the wet strings of her sunbonnet hanging across the soft sweep of her throat, a thousand water-jewels gleaming in her hair.

She had forgotten about that rider over there—he was well over half a mile from the river and headed toward the cabin when she last saw him, so she didn't dream that he had ridden down to the wagon and now sat his horse, facing the river, talking to Will as she came out of the river.

He saw her first, and she saw the startled expression leap into his face. She noticed even then how unbelievably thin his face was, and how brown. Then she remembered she was holding her shoes and stockings in one hand, the sodden roll of her skirt in the other, and she dropped both and stood rooted.

As he continued to stare, her first wild surge of humiliation gave way to indignation. Then this man suddenly snatched off his hat, and his unruly hair blew about in the breeze.

He made as if to speak, but Kentucky, standing stock-still, suddenly kicked violently at her belly, then lunged her full length. The stranger narrowly escaped being run down, and Will Eddy was torn from the seat and tossed in a wide, arching curve before he struck the ground and lay still, stunned.

KENTUCKY lunged again, dragging the bay with her, and the wagon. But the bay acted as a drag, and the mare's wild course bent in a wide circle, swinging back toward the river. Randall, who saw that this course must eventually take team and wagon over the bank and into the river at a point where there was a twenty-foot drop, cast decorum to the winds and ran desperately, hoping to intersect the team and stop them before they could plunge to destruction into the rock-studded stream.

She heard the stranger's warning shout, then the drum of the big sorrel's hoofs, as he went past her like a bullet, the rider swinging a wide loop with his rope.

The team was perilously near the bank then, and Randall died a thousand deaths while this man delayed his cast. She stopped, powerless to move another inch, and closed her eyes. Then she heard the vibrant twang of a hard-stretched rope, a shock, and when she looked again, both horses were down and a rope ran from Kentucky's neck to the saddlehorn on the big sorrel. The stranger was already out of the saddle and running toward the team, where Kentucky was struggling wildly to get up, failing because the sorrel kept backing off, keeping that rope taut.

The stranger hurled himself at her head, slammed it down and held it there.

"Quick!" he shouted, without looking around. "Get her loose—get these traces down!"

Randall found she could still run. She threw herself at Kentucky's traces and fought them free.

"Now the breast strap!" panted the man on Kentucky's head.

The breast strap defied her efforts to disengage it. Most of Kentucky's twelve hundred pounds was against it, and the leather was stretched hard as iron.

"I can't! The strap is so tight!" she panted.

He jerked a knife from his pocket and opened it with his teeth.

"Cut it!"

She put the keen blade to the leather. It ran before it like tissue. The tongue dropped.

"Get back—I'm goin' to let her up! She'll kill you if she hits you!"

He leaped clear of Kentucky's head and legged it for his sorrel. Up came Kentucky with a bound, and Randall watched a desperate fight between her mare and the sorrel, during which, time and again, she thought the sorrel had lost and that Kentucky must surely dive right over the bank.

But the sorrel did not lose. Steadily he worked Kentucky back from the river and toward the corral. Suddenly Kentucky stopped her wild plunging and, docile as a lamb, trotted behind this strange rider, straight into the corral.

There she suddenly went wild again, and the young rider threw her thunderously—threw her so hard that she lay stunned while he leaped at her and tied her so she could not get up. Then he dashed toward the cabin. He came running back in a little while, carrying a long-necked whiskey bottle in his hand. The bottle was nearly full of a liquid that foamed furiously when he shook it.

RANDALL understood then. Kentucky was stricken by water colic, that swift and sometimes fatal affliction that often attacks overheated horses that have drunk too much cold water. She had seen race horses die of it almost as quickly as a bullet could have killed them. And she had seen other horses, recovered from the direct attack, lose their hoofs and have to be shot.

Will appeared at the corral then. To him this young stranger spoke.

"Hold the mare's head up!"

Will tried to raise Kentucky's head, but failed. Instantly the stranger thrust the bottle into Randall's hand.

"Hold it!" he snapped, then set his boot against Kentucky's head, between her ears, reached over and caught her lower jaw, and with one swift heave brought her head up until her nose pointed at the sky.

Through set teeth he said, "Drench her!"

Will took the bottle and forced the neck into Kentucky's mouth. The liquid gurgled, but Kentucky did not swallow. Randall knelt, careless of a possible blow from a shod hoof, and stroked the mare's tense and strained throat. The mare swallowed convulsively. The liquid in the upturned bottle ran out faster. Kentucky gulped again, and again.

"That's all!" said the man. "Look out, folks, I'm goin' to let her up!"

He cast off the rope.

Kentucky swung up until she lay on her belly, her legs folded under her. Then up she came with a heave, and around and around the corral she went, not running now, but trotting swiftly.

Ranzy Blair

"Let her go," said this man. The motion will help her. I believe we got the medicine to her in time. We'll see how she acts."

Randall said in an agony of suspense, "When will you know?"

"Pretty soon," he said. "Water colic is about as quick as a gun, and," he added, looking directly at Will, "sometimes almost as deadly."

Will said harshly, "Don't amount to anything. I've dosed many a colicky horse, mister."

Randall suddenly felt ashamed of her brother. "We do appreciate what you've done for Kentucky," she said. "If she lives, you saved her."

"Some horses," said this young man, his eyes following the mare, "can stand a load of cold water when they're hot. And some of them can't. That mare is built like a fine piece of machinery. She's near perfect, but she won't stand abuse. Out here, we always cool a hot horse out, before lettin' him to water."

Before Will could reply to that thrust, Kentucky stopped dead still. For an awful moment Randall thought she was about to go wild again, but Kentucky didn't. Instead, she lay down, very, very gently, stretched her neck and laid her head flat on the ground. To all appearances she was a dead horse.

Randall stole a fearful look at the young man. He nodded encouragingly.

"She'll make it now," he said. "She's over the hardest pull."

HE STEPPED over to Kentucky then and knelt at her head. The mare didn't move, not so much as an ear. Randall moved closer and saw that the man was holding his fingers in the sharp angle of Kentucky's jaw. She put her hand on the mare's neck. It was not hot and dry now—it was cold and clammy.

The man stood up. "Her pulse is gettin' better. She may lay like that for hours. When she gets up she'll be well. But it gets mighty chilly here nights. Better cover her with blankets, if she stays down."

Now for the first time Randall remembered she was clad in a short, skimpy underskirt, and that the rest of her clothing was wet and embarrassingly revealing. She murmured, "I'll get some from the wagon," and hurried away.

She crept under the wagon top and hastily changed to dry clothing, dry shoes and stockings. She put on a little favorite dress, much different from the ugly dark one she usually wore on the wagon. That little dress was mighty kind to her figure, and there was a trimming of white organdie about the collar that rose around her throat like foam.

She got two blankets and hurried back toward the corral. The sun was down now, and already the air was beginning to bite.

Before she reached the corral she met Will coming back toward the wagon. He stopped and looked at her, his lip curling in that hateful way he sometimes had.

"Where's the party?" he asked.

She said, "Will, my other dress was soaked. I had to put on something."

"Nobody would have thought so *awhile* ago," he retorted, "the way you were flyin' around in next to nothin'!"

She said, "Will—"

He cut her off. "Next thing, I reckon you'll be wantin' to settle around *here.*"

"We could go farther and do worse," she replied. "The land is here—"

"We're not stoppin' *here!* At least *I'm* not. When I stop, I intend to stop where I can see at least *one* house in forty miles. You agreed—"

She said swiftly, "I've not broken my agreement, Will. If you want to go on, we'll go on."

She went on to the corral then and covered Kentucky carefully with the blankets. The mare lay so still and breathed so shallowly that it was hard for Randall to accept the stranger's statement that she was past danger. She watched her some time, then went back to the wagon in the growing dusk, where Will already had a fire started.

The stranger came over to their fire and, leaning against a wagon wheel, talked to Will. Now for the

first time Randall had an opportunity to observe him closely.

The one thing that struck her most was his thinness. He was tall, but his tallness was accented enormously by that strange leanness.

He was thin after the manner of a person recovering from a severe and long sickness. Yet his face was a healthy brown and his eyes were as clear as mountain water. He looked loose and almost indolent as he leaned against the wheel there, talking in that easy, gently drawling voice of his. Yet Randall knew he was not indolent or weak, for she had seen a living example of his energy and agility. It did not seem possible that so thin and so weak appearing a man could burst into the tremendous activity he had shown while handling her mare.

He said now to Will, "I got plenty of room in my cabin over there. You folks are welcome to share it with me. Gets cold out here."

Will replied ungraciously, "We'll make out all right here."

The young man nodded. "Well, in case you're short of anything, come and get it or holler, and I'll bring it over."

"We're not short," Will replied.

The man lingered yet a little while, then went back to his cabin.

Randall said, almost sharply, "You could at least have been civil to him, Will!"

He looked at her, but did not reply. Supper was a silent meal, and after it was over, Will spread some blankets under the wagon and turned in.

RANDALL sat a long time gazing into the dying fire. The murmur of the river was audible now. Out on the prairie, a lone wolf howled long and mournfully, and cold chills chased each other up and down Randall's spine. The wildness of this land seemed to close down about her and menace her. Her thoughts went to her mare, lying yonder in the corral, so still and motionless, like a dead horse. The thought made her heart pound. Perhaps Kentucky *was* dead.

She stood up with a quick motion. A light shone bravely from the cabin there. That light beckoned, pulled at her. This lonely camp, with her brother sleeping so indifferently, seemed cold, almost hostile. Here was no friendliness, no welcome. Yonder, there were both.

She whipped a light shawl about her shoulders to shut out the chill of the night, and went with noiseless step toward the corral. Kentucky was a formless blotch against the dark earth; a silent, motionless blotch. Randall knelt beside her and slipped her hand under the blankets. The mare's coat was decidedly warmer now; her breathing more apparent.

Kentucky would be all right in the morning. He had said so, and Randall knew, now, that it was so.

From here she could see that the light shone, not from a window, but from an open door. She refused to deliberate, but turned toward the cabin. It pulled her.

He was sitting with his chair propped back against the wall, his boot-heels hooked in the rounds of the chair, his eyes closed, a dead cigarette between his long, slim fingers. She stood there in the door, hesitant now, because he seemed to be asleep.

But he was not asleep, and although she had made no sound, he seemed to sense her nearness, for his eyes suddenly opened and looked straight at her, without surprise. He arose and said:

"I was hopin' you would come around and visit a spell. Won't you come in and let me make you some coffee? It gets right lonesome out here on this claim."

She said, "I would enjoy a cup of coffee. We've been out for days on that wagon."

THE cabin was new and spotlessly clean. He had tacked new white muslin over the walls and had ceiled and floored the place with new, smoothly planed boards. He talked companionably as he put the coffee on and got out a pitcher of real cream.

Randall noticed that and said, "I haven't tasted real cream since we left Kentucky."

He smiled. "When I came out here, I worked for a big cow outfit over by Tipup—Chap Herr's spread. We were lucky if we got canned cow in our coffee there, and I swore that if I ever got a place of my own, I'd shore break a cow or two to milk. I always thought it was funny, in a cow country, never to have milk or cream." He laughed. "I know why now—after I tried to break one of these Western critters to milk!"

She said, "But you did break her, didn't you?"

He nodded. "But there was a long time when I wasn't sure she wouldn't break me!" he laughed. "The didoes that critter cut before she came to time! And even yet I have to work her into the barn and tie her head and tail. I aim to start on her calf younger."

He poured the coffee then, drank one cupful, then leaned back and fashioned a cigarette, watching her. He drew fire, seemingly from his thumb, and lighted his smoke.

"I've been so busy talkin' I forgot to tell you who I am. Just plain Ranzy Blair, gamblin' against starvation, here on this claim."

She said simply, "I'm Randall Eddy. That's my brother Will, out there. Will got—I mean, we just got tired of having nothing back home in Kentucky and came West to get rich. That's all. I'd much rather hear you talk."

He grinned engagingly. "I'll bet we could get along just fine. Next to eatin', there's nothin' I like better than a good friendly talk. I reckon maybe that's because, when I first came out here, I wasn't able to do anything else much. Doctors gave me a year. But I fooled 'em. I ain't got my full weight back yet, but I'm *cured*. Even the doctors have to admit that now. But if it hadn't been for Chap Herr, I'd have been planted long ago. He took me in when I wasn't able to do anything—when I was broke. He put into me some of the old iron that he's so full of. He wouldn't *let* me quit." He looked at her with a certain warmth in his face. "There ain't many men like that—or women either, I reckon."

Looking at him, Randall understood. And she knew that the battle he had waged against that relentless enemy, illness, had, in a way, purged and fortified this young man in a way few people ever attain. It must have been that, she reasoned, that made him different. Or was it *because* of that?

His voice came again. "That black mare of yours—she sort of reminds me of myself, in a way, out there. Only, of course, her fight was a lot shorter. It seemed to me like she was just beggin' for somebody to do something for her—and sort of apologizin' for actin' so bad. Kentucky—is that what you call her?"

Randall said, "Kentucky Bell. I named her after a poem we used to have in our school books back home. It was about a girl that had a horse like Kentucky Bell, and with that name. It was back when Morgan's Raiders were trying to get away from the Yankee Calvary. One of Morgan's men—just a boy—was wounded and his horse was used up. He had to drop out, and this girl hid him until the Yankee Calvary passed. Then she gave him her favorite horse to get home on."

She stopped then, noticing the intensity with which he was watching her.

"The story ended there?" he said incredulously.

She felt her cheeks heat. "It was—just a poem."

"I'd sure like to read that poem. You *sure* you ain't left anything out?"

She dropped her eyes before his. "Well—I believe she *did* hear from him after the war."

A quiet triumph shone in his eyes. "It wouldn't have been right if she hadn't!" He was silent a little while, then he said, "You folks got some particular place you been headed for?"

SHE shook her head. "You see, Will is too small and light to make a hand. But he's a fine rider. We thought if we came West, he could get a job riding for some cowman, close to our claim, so he could be home nights. Will was a jockey, back home."

He said, "I sort of figured that. Can you tell me why he don't like me?"

She said quickly, "It's not that he doesn't like *you*. Will hates about everybody now—even himself. You see, Will got into trouble back home. He—he threw a race and was barred forever from riding again. *That* was the real reason why we came West. I couldn't stand to see him go bad. But he didn't have a chance back home. He will have, out here, for riders are needed. That's why I persuaded him to come."

He said quietly, "It looks like you have got your battle too, Randall. I was hopin' you folks would settle around here. I see now why you can't. Your brother wouldn't agree to it. He hates me."

Randall knew it was so. She said, "Some day he'll see how wrong he is. I—I would like to stop here, too." Then, suddenly terrified at what he might read from that simple statement, she stood up quickly. "I must get back to the wagon! My brother—"

He caught her shoulders and turned her facing him. "Randall," he said, "you mean that? Would you like to stay?"

There was a hunger in his eyes—and a shine of hope against hope. She knew she could have this. She didn't need to speak a word. She had only to let him see what was in her eyes. A fierce rebellion seethed within her. Why must she sacrifice her chance for happiness, just to help Will make a new life? Why? Why shouldn't she lift her eyes now, and let Ranzy Blair see what he wanted to see shining in them?

The struggle was short and fierce, but Randall won against herself.

She said simply, "I'll have to stay with Will."

He released her instantly. "I sort of figured you would—you're that kind."

She dared to look at his face then. He looked like a person who had glimpsed paradise, only to have it snatched away.

"I'll walk with you to the wagon," he said quietly.

The sky was a black curtain studded with bright stars. The earth was a formless void over which she seemed to float. The dull red eye of her dying camp fire leered at her. Ranzy Blair stopped. His voice came, low and gentle:

"Yes," he said. "I can see why you must go on. I hope it won't be in vain. And Randall, I—this may be the last time I'll see you alone. I've known you only a few hours, but I—I couldn't love you more if I'd known you a million years! I couldn't!"

Randall felt her strong resolve melting. She felt Ranzy Blair's arm close about her shoulders and tighten.

"No—no, Ranzy!" she said faintly.

It was too late then, for the flame within had driven them both, and their lips had met.

Will Eddys harsh call came through the dark:

"Make up your mind where you're goin' to sleep, Randall—here or in the cabin!"

Ranzy Blair's arms dropped away and she heard the sharp, fierce intake of his breath. He made one quick step toward the wagon. She caught his arm, in sudden terror.

"No, no!" she whispered sharply. Then more gently, "Good night, Ranzy, and *goodby.*"

After she was in the wagon and ready for bed, she looked once more toward his cabin. The light was still shining.

She said to herself, "I must not let him see me again—not alone!"

WILL EDDY was a late riser, usually. But this morning he was up before Randall. He had a fire built and he had brought Kentucky over from the corral, and he had both horses harnessed and fed when Randall awoke.

The gray dawn was cold and pitiless. Events of the night seemed now only a dream. Here, now, was the travel-worn wagon, with its bad wheel. Here was Will, more ugly than ever, an injured look on his face.

He said not one word until breakfast was over and the things had been stowed in the wagon. Then he confronted her with a definite malice.

"I want to know *now,*" he said, "what you aim to do."

She said quietly, "I'll do what you wish, Will. You want to go on, don't you?"

"We're goin' on," he said harshly, "or we're breakin' up this combine here and now, and I'll head back to Kentucky. Even if I can't ride, there's *other* angles I can play."

"We'll go on, Will. Nothing has changed."

"See that you stick to that!" he said, and started putting the team to the wagon.

Kentucky looked gaunt this morning, but she was the same old high-spirited Kentucky. They were in the seat and ready to pull out when Ranzy Blair's tall thin form appeared in the doorway of his cabin. He made as though to come on to the wagon, then he stopped and waved his hand. His voice crossed the distance clearly:

"Good luck—good luck—goodby!"

How long those words rang in Randall's ears!

THE sun mounted swiftly, and soon the loose wheel, which had been tightened by its immersion in the river, began complaining again. Soon the bay's singletree was screaming against the tire of that wheel. Head up, ears forward, Kentucky settled to the load, willingly. The gallant spirit of this mare made Randall secretly ashamed. The mare was stronger than she was.

Will Eddy slouched in the seat and eyed the complaining wheel with increasing sullenness.

"It will never last to the next town!" he said. "And if it does, how are we goin' to replace it—with no money?"

Randall did not reply. The answer could have been so easy.

"Lord, what a mess!" he exclaimed. Then, when she did not reply to this, he turned on her fiercely. "Go on—say it! Say we could have stopped back there! Say you wanted to stop! Say I'm a yellow dog for draggin' you on when there is no good reason! Go on, *say* it!" he shouted.

Instead, she said, "Will, it's not what we *want* to do, it's what we *should* do that counts. This is past. Let's look ahead. We'll get along somehow. We always have."

He had no answer for this.

Noon, and the wild sweep of the prairie was broken by a low huddle of buildings.

"There's the town!" Will exclaimed. "Maybe the wheel will last

that far. We'll get it fixed somehow."

Hardly had he spoken before the wheel gave up the ghost and collapsed. The sudden drop of the axle almost threw them out of the seat. The team stopped, and Will Eddy cursed bitterly.

"Will," she said, "that won't help. There's only one thing to do—take Kentucky out and ride in and see if you can't borrow a wheel, so we can get the wagon in and have this wheel fixed."

"I guess that's as good plan as any," he replied.

He took Kentucky out, stripped off the harness, jumped upon her with something of his old agility. Randall watched them line out for town, Kentucky running straight and true, and light as a bird, Will sitting her as though he were a part of her, a matchless, a natural-born rider.

Watching him, Randall took new heart. Anyone who could do anything as well as her brother could ride was not hopeless. Swiftly horse and rider dwindled to a speck, then the speck dissolved into the town.

An hour passed; two. The sun was half down the western sky. The bay drooped in the harness, resting first one hip, then the other. Randall considered taking the horse out and riding over to the river, a mile or more on their right. There would at least be shade and water there. But she was afraid Will would come and find her gone, so she gave that up.

She didn't worry—not then. But when the sun touched the prairie and she saw prospects of a night alone, out there in that wild land, she felt sure something had happened to Will.

Then, with the night shadows closing, Will came at last. But he had no wheel.

"What kept you so long, Will?" she asked.

"I was tryin' to locate a wheel." His speech was thick and she smelled the revolting reek of liquor on his breath. "It's farther than it looks—seven miles."

"What *will* we do?"

"Try to get the wagon over to the river and camp. I made a deal with the blacksmith. He's goin' to send a wheel out in the morning. He had to make one over."

"How will we get to the river?" she asked.

"Oh, that hub will roll that far!" He was putting Kentucky back to the wagon as he talked, and she noticed that he seemed in better spirits than before. The effects of the liquor. . . .

IT was a slow, laborious trip to the river. The hub kept digging into the ground and pulled the team hard. Will had to rest the horses often. It was pitch dark when they came to the river, and while Will took out the team and watered it, Randall gathered wood and started a fire. Their supply of provisions was very low, but for once Will did not complain. He seemed happier tonight, more like his old self than in many a day. He even remarked about her long wait out there in the blazing sun, with no water or shade.

She said, "I didn't mind, Will. I was afraid something had happened to you.Will, how are we going to pay the blacksmith for fixing the wheel?"

He said, almost jovially, "Let *me* worry about that. I ought to be good for something!"

There was no cabin across the way tonight, with its light to welcome her. There was only this lonesome river and the wild prairie. She made her bed in the wagon box and retired as soon as supper was over. Will, she noticed, still sat by the low fire, apparently buried in some secret thought.

She must have slept awhile, because presently she roused and heard voices—Will's voice and another man's. The voices were pitched low, and she only heard a word now and

then, but there was something vaguely familiar about that other voice—something disturbing.

The fire was out, and the shadows were so black about the wagon that she could not see even Will. She heard a horse stamp, close to the wagon, and the creak of saddle leather.

After a time this man, whoever he was, mounted and rode off.

She said quietly, "Will *who* was that?"

His voice came, quick and angry: "Ain't you asleep yet? Why, that was that Blair fellow."

She caught her breath. "Will—it *wasn't!*"

"All right then, it wasn't. Have it your way! But who else in this God-forsaken country knows we're in it?"

That ended the discussion, but the next morning she noticed Will looking at her oddly.

"You think I ought to have woke you up so you could have spooned a while with that guy?" he asked.

She looked at him steadily and he dropped his eyes. "Do you always have to be hateful?" she reproached him.

A man from town appeared then, bringing the wheel. He was the blacksmith, Will explained; a towering giant of a man, with only an undershirt covering his upper body, his mighty, muscled arms bare and streaked with grime. She watched him raise the axle from the ground as if it were a chip, hold it with one hand, take off the old hub and slip on the wheel he had brought.

"There you are, bud," he said cheerfully. "That'll be twenty-five bucks."

RANDALL almost fainted. Twenty-five dollars! They didn't have two! But her astonishment was even greater when Will pulled a roll of bills from his pocket and paid the man.

When he had gone, she said, "Will, where did you get all that money?"

He hesitated a moment, then said harshly, "Well, if you've got to know, I won it!"

"*Won* it!" she exclaimed. "How?"

His eyes went to Kentucky. "With that mare. There was a bunch of suckers jumped me for a race yesterday, in town. They got took, that's all."

She said, "Will, we came West to get away from that."

"Well, what would you rather I done? Let you set out there forever? I didn't have any money—and that blacksmith wasn't puttin' out any credit. I had to do something, didn't I? Would you rather I stole it?"

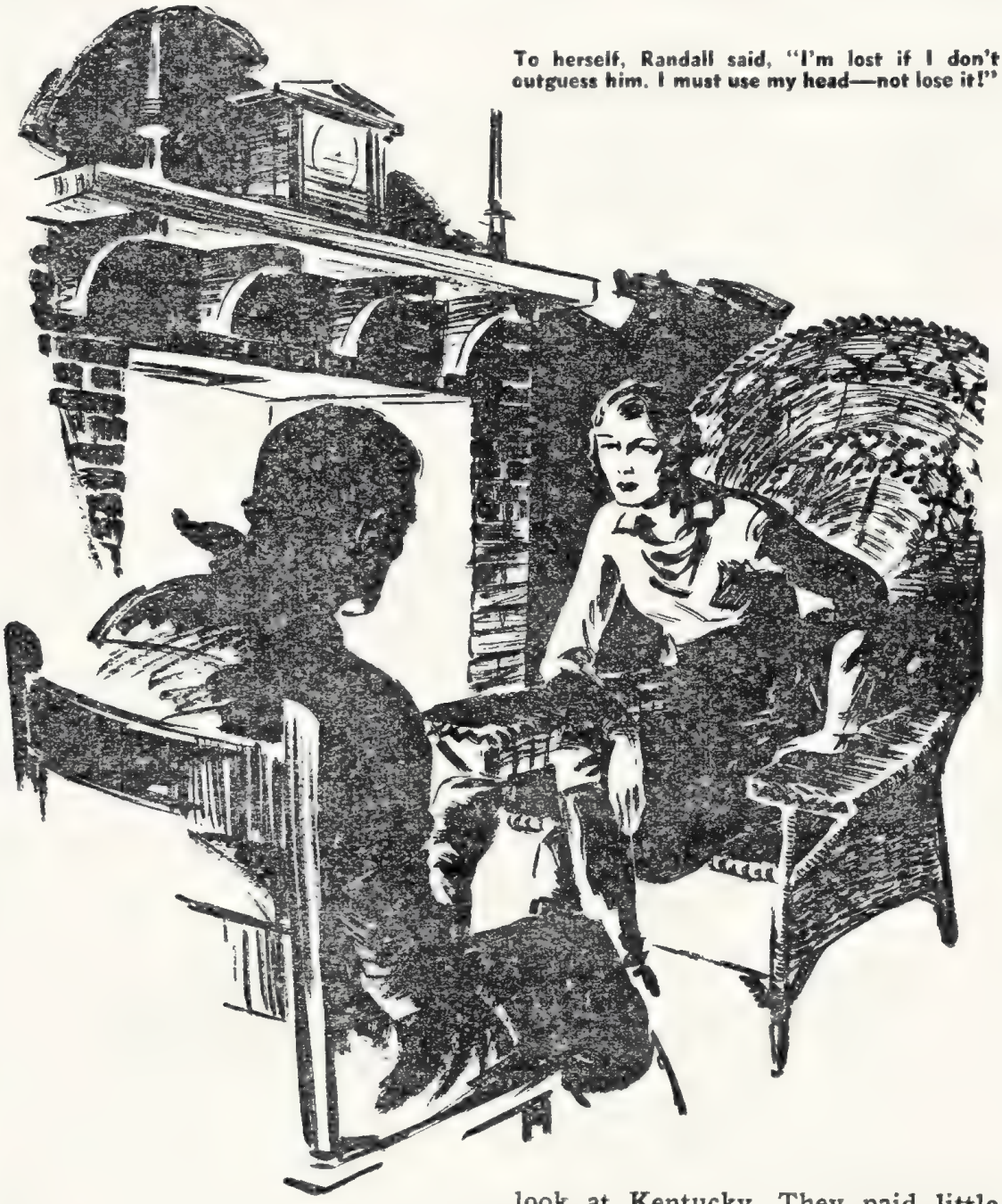
"No, of course not," she said quickly. "Under the circumstances, you couldn't be blamed. But you didn't have anything to put up against their money, did you?"

"I had the mare," he replied. "Now jump on me again! It was a cinch! In the first place, the other skate couldn't run. And in the second, they put a hundred-pound saddle on him and a hundred-and-eighty-pound man in the saddle. There wasn't any risk of losing Kentucky. Lord!" His eyes suddenly shone. "You ought to have seen me show that plug up! Kentucky," he finished, "is a *race* horse."

Randall fought back the hard things that she felt impelled to say. She knew there was a risk to all horse races, no matter how much one horse might outclass the other. So many things could happen. And Will had had no right to put her mare in jeopardy. But since their need was so great and Will had had no other recourse, she let it pass.

"But never do that again, Will," she said. "Never!"

It was noon when they came to town, for Will did not hurry. The one dusty street ran straight as a gun-barrel, flanked on either side by sun-scorched buildings. Will stopped the team about the middle of the street and jumped out.



To herself, Randall said, "I'm lost if I don't outguess him. I must use my head—not lose it!"

"Be back in a minute," he said, and disappeared between the swinging doors of a false-fronted building before which stood more horses than were about any other building.

East or West, there was no mistaking a saloon, Randall reflected bitterly. And she was glad she had put on the long, full dark dress and the deep sunbonnet, for men stopped to look at Kentucky. They paid little attention to Randall, a lone drooping figure there on the seat, and their talk was all of the race the previous afternoon.

One man in particular attracted her attention. He was a tall, seasoned man with a solid hardness about him, and a certain integrity. She heard a man call him "Chap," and remembered that Ranzy Blair had spoken of a "Chap Herr." This must be the

man. He fitted Ranzy Bair's description.

At length Will came back to the wagon. She saw his face was flushed with drink, and there was a strange excitement in his eyes.

"Randall," he said, "they want a chance to get even. They claim I caught them asleep and it wasn't fair."

"You mean they want you to race Kentucky again? No! I won't stand for it. I won't, Will!"

"Now listen!" he said passionately. "There won't be any risk whatever *this* time, because the mare will not be at stake. But some guys that lost yesterday want a chance to get even. They're squawking that the race wasn't run fair. We've got to give them a chance, Randall."

"No!" she said.

ANGER twisted his face. "You will," he growled, "or we'll take out. I'll head back for Kentucky and you can go back to that shack at the bottom of the badlands. I reckon that's what you *want* to do, anyhow."

"Will," she said desperately, "you'll never get away from what we came all this distance to get away from, not this way. It's not that I just want to be stubborn."

"No," he said coldly, "it's just that you want an excuse to get shut of me. All right—you're the doctor!"

"Will, if I agree to this, will you promise me that you won't ask me to let you race Kentucky again?"

"You bet I will!" he said eagerly. "Wait—I'll tell them!"

He rushed back to the saloon, and life around that sleepy town began suddenly to boil. There were two distinct factions, Randall discovered. One, very few in number, which favored her horse. The other, Chap Herr and his friends, who were backing the other horse.

Chap Herr and his friends seemed to be waiting for someone. She heard someone shout, "Here he comes!" and turning, she saw Ranzy Blair come down the street, riding the tall sorrel. The Herr group instantly surrounded him, and Will came hastening back to the wagon.

"Throw out my racing saddle," he told Randall. "We're about ready to start."

She dropped down in the bed and crept back under the canvas top, secured the saddle, the finest of saddlemaker's art, and handed it to Will. That saddle was light as a feather, yet it was practically indestructible.

"What horse are you racing against, Will?" she asked.

His eyes gleamed with a quick malice.

"That white-footed sorrel!"

ALL along, Randall had felt that she should never have given in to him. Now she saw the trap—or thought she did. But she did not know the full magnitude of this thing until Ranzy Blair left his horse tied to the railing and came toward the wagon. She saw trouble in his face.

He said directly, "Do you know a man named Bert Shasta?"

Like a shot it came to her. That voice out there on the river, talking to her brother! It was his—Bert Shasta's. And it was Bert Shasta who had caused all the trouble back home. And now he was here?

She said faintly, "Is *he* out here?"

He said gravely, "He runs a gambling den here. I don't like this. Something—smells!" His direct eyes searched her face. "Why," he asked. "is Shasta and his bunch bettin' so heavy on your mare? They know my sorrel has never been beaten out here. They know that it will take a mighty good horse to beat him."

"I—I don't know," she said faintly.

"Shasta—" he said the name bitterly, "—is a crook and a scoundrel. Chap Herr caught him cheatin' in a card game and Chap treated him pretty

rough. Shasta has been layin' for a chance to get even, and he's jockeyed Chap into makin' a reckless bet. If your mare beats me, Chap stands a good chance of bein' ruined!"

She said decisively, "Then we'll just call off the race. Kentucky is mine—I can do what I please with her."

Ranzy Blair shook his head. "It's gone too far to do that. Shasta's bunch will say we urged you to call it off, and Chap will never stand for that. It's just the same as bein' beat —worse!"

"Then what *can* we do?" she asked desperately. "I'm willing to do *anything* to help."

"There's just one thing that bothers me," he said. "My horse can beat your mare—if the race is fair. I feel sure he can do it now. He couldn't do it if your mare was in good racing condition and running on a regular track. But he can do it here, under these conditions."

"Then everything will be all right, won't it?"

"If the race is *straight*. But Shasta wouldn't be plungin' like he is unless he felt sure of winnin'. I'm worried about your brother—about what you told me."

"You mean—"

"I mean," he said grimly, "that if anything crooked was to show in this race, I'd hate to be in your brother's shoes. This is the West, Randall, not the East. These men make short work of crooks when they catch them. And I'm tellin' you, I believe there's somethin' crooked afoot!"

It was the darkest moment in Randall Eddy's life. Not even that moment when Will was disgraced and ruled off the Kentucky tracks was as dark. For she knew—she *knew*—that Ranzy Blair was right. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the whole thing had been planned last night when Bert Shasta came to their camp like a thief in the night.

She said hopelessly, "The race must be called off."

"No!" he said. "I tell you Chap won't *stand* for that. He'd never be able to hold his head up again if he let it be said that a crooked gambler had made him take backwater. I've thought of something. Somebody other than your brother must ride your mare."

"But who?" she asked. "They won't agree to anybody—just anybody!"

"You!" he said. "They'll have to agree to *you*. Will you do it?"

IT WAS so simple, so amazingly simple, Randall wondered she had not thought of it. "Yes!" she exclaimed. "Yes, I will! I'll make Will let me ride, or there'll be no race. Kentucky is mine and I have the right to ride her if I wish. Tell Will to come here."

He said softly, "I knew you'd be a sport!" wheeled and went into the saloon.

Will came out of the saloon hurriedly.

"What is it now?" he demanded.

"Will," she said, "I think it's gotten out that you—that you were ruled off the Kentucky tracks. Will, *I'll* have to ride Kentucky."

He was speechless with rage and astonishment. He said furiously, "You told that—that—"

She cut him off. "I won't argue with you, Will. Either I ride, or there will be no race. That's final!"

He stared at her fixedly. He knew when she spoke like that, words were useless, and he did not try to bluff his way through this. He said, instead, "You'll be a pretty sight in a racing saddle, with your knees up under your chin and your dress flying over your head, won't you!"

"Your old racing silks are in the trunk, Will. I can wear them."

He said, "Wait a minute," and went back into the saloon. She knew he went to consult Bert Shasta about

this unexpected development. He was back quickly.

"Now *you* listen!" he said. "You've just the same as accused me of gettin' ready to pull some crooked work. We'll let that go. If I agree to let you ride Kentucky, will you give me your word that you will ride a straight race—that you'll ride to *win?*"

"Of course!" she said.

"Then get those silks on!" he exclaimed.

Randall was trembling when she crept back under the wagon cover; trembling until she could hardly secure the end openings, so no prying eye might see her change.

SHE opened the old camel-backed trunk and laid out Will's bright racing silks. They had faded but little, and the smooth, cool touch of those silks brought back to her memories of what might have been—what used to be.

Memories of those days when Will was the most sought-after rider in all the Bluegrass. Memories of days when those same colors were flashing down the stretch, winning, with the crowd roaring acclaim. And memories of the day Will was beaten, shamefully beaten, and of the dark days that followed.

Resolutely she closed her mind to those dark days. This was the living present. She took off that dreadful dark dress and put on those cool bright silks. She was tall for a girl and Will was small for a man, and those silks were kind to her.

Only the waist and the breast fitted poorly. The waist was too big, but she remedied that by pinning it over. There was nothing she could do with the breast, designed to fit a slender-chested man. The silk was tight there, distressingly tight, and clearly accented the warm, strong, feminine curves.

Those silks were a rich cream trimmed with a blazing scarlet. There was a bright scarlet cap which sat saucily on her head, and fine, stitched boots.

From outside, Will's voice came: "Ready, Randall?"

She knew she must take the plunge, and she dreaded, yet welcomed it. The woman in her was strong enough for that. So she pulled the canvas open and stepped from the trunk-lid to the seat. There was a hush from the crowd—a murmur. Then she jumped down and held her foot for Will to help her into the saddle.

He caught the foot in his hands. A spring and a toss and she was in the saddle, light as a bird.

"The stirrups, Will!" she whispered. "They're too short." Then, when he bent to adjust them, "Will, how do I look?"

He said, "You've knocked them dead! There—how's that?"

"Better!" She settled herself. She noticed, then, that the crowd had increased tremendously. The street was a sea of faces, all turned toward her.

Kentucky pranced a little. Will took her by the bit and led her through the crowd. A circle opened, and in that circle, Ranzy Blair sat his big sorrel. He had discarded the heavy saddle and sat the horse Indian-fashion. He had even removed his boots and shirt. He did not look once toward her, and she saw that his face was set and pale.

The big blacksmith shoved into the circle, holding a six-hooter in his hand. He waved the people aside and Randall saw the road open before her. With the gun, the blacksmith pointed.

"You ride to that rise out there, turn and ride back. We can see you all the way—and there better not be any monkey business. When I count three I'm goin' to shoot off this here gun. You go when the gun goes off!"

There was a little pause, then the blacksmith slowly raised the gun.

He counted, "One—two—three!"

Bang! The gun!

FROM a standing start, the live sorrel launched himself like a projectile. Randall had never watched a trained cow-horse work before and had no way of knowing how they were trained by a lifetime of work to start and stop instantly.

That first lunge gave the sorrel a three-lengths lead. Then he went with short, choppy strides, lengthening the reach as he built up speed. But Kentucky, slow at getting into her long sweeping stride, was left—and left badly.

It looked as if Kentucky was beaten before she started; as if she were poorly or unfairly ridden. There was a roar from the crowd, and she heard Will's shrill yell:

"Go on! Ride that mare!"

A sudden panic assailed Randall. Suppose she were beaten, badly beaten, and her friendliness toward Ranzy Blair were discovered. The rage and suspicion that Ranzy Blair had warned her would be directed against Will, by his crowd, could be easily diverted into those backing her mare—against herself and Will.

Now Ranzy Blair's bare back stopped growing smaller. Kentucky was finding her racing legs. She was coming up on the sorrel. Up, up, with such a blazing burst of speed that it brought Randall's heart into her mouth.

Yes, Kentucky was a race horse. Her full superiority showed, now that she was really stretched out on the slow grade up to the top of the ridge, where her longer reach and lighter weight came to full advantage.

Then Randall's fear changed. The sorrel would be beaten! For a moment the two horses raced eye to eye, locked there in a grim struggle. She saw the sorrel's near nostril, wide, distended, and blood-red. She could hear his agonized breathing as he fought off Kentucky's challenge. He was a race horse too. He was running his heart out—and losing. Kentucky moved ahead. Instinctively Randall took in on the reins, and Ranzy Blair's voice cut like a whip lash:

"Go on! Go on! Let that mare run!"

Kentucky seemed literally to leap ahead then. As they stormed over the top of the ridge, the turning point, Randall flashed a look back. The sorrel just then topped the ridge and she saw a wonderful exhibition of horse and man, working together. For that big horse seemed to rear straight into the air until he towered high against the skyline—then he spun like a top, and there were Randall and Kentucky, still racing the *other* way, while Ranzy Blair's bare back was again mocking her.

Again Randall's heart almost failed her. She knew how it would look to the crowd. It would look as though she had deliberately overridden the mark in order to give the sorrel the advantage. How could she explain that she had never seen a horse stop and turn like that?

She got Kentucky stopped and turned, then once more had to lift her into racing stride. When she came over the ridge, Ranzy Blair's back was so far away it did not seem humanly possible for any rider to overtake him.

Added to that was the sorrel's extra weight and size, this momentum, on the down grade, proving an advantage. He was going like an express train.

She leaned far over Kentucky's neck, her face slashed by the mare's flying mane.

"Go, Kentucky!" she implored. "We've got to make it close!"

THE mare seemed to draw down close to the ground and gain feet in length. Few horses would have had the heart to race against what appeared to be an unbeatable lead. But

Kentucky was race horse to the core. She put her head and neck in a straight line with her body and she *flew*.

Randall could see the crowd then. It was shouting, leaping, raving, gone wild! She could see Will, too, and he was motioning, begging, shouting for her to come on. She could tell by his actions that he was scared—scared badly.

A hundred yards from the finish line and she was still fifty feet back of the flying sorrel. Kentucky was beaten—but not badly beaten. She was still coming strong, and closing with a rush. It was all right. Nobody could say Randall hadn't ridden the mare right. Nobody could find fault with her ride. They should have warned her about the turn. Even Will, she thought, might well have made the same mistake, had he ridden Kentucky in this race.

Then she saw the sorrel suddenly swerve, and stagger. Kentucky swerved also. Then that sorrel, with his nose almost on the finish line, seemed to fold his forelegs and *dive*. He struck the ground with an impact that Randall could feel clear back there, and Kentucky had to leap wildly to avoid running over the prostrate horse and rider. She flashed by them and over the finish line—a winner by two lengths!

It happened with such unexpected, such stunning speed that Randall's mind at first failed to grasp the full significance of it all. But then Will dashed out of the crowd and seized the panting mare's bridle, his face working, his eyes almost wild, gibbering:

"We won! We won! Lord, what a race! I thought you were gone—gone! Lord, how that sorrel did run! Get off—get off!"

Faint and weak, Randall clung to the saddle. She had won. And Ranzy Blair had told her that the best friend he ever had had would be ruined, if that happened. And—she had won.

"Lead—Kentucky—to the wagon, Will!" she said faintly. "I—I couldn't stand—"

He threw one swift look at her face, then he led the mare through that press, now congregating about Ranzy Blair and his fallen horse. Randall looked back. Horse and rider were up, coated from head to foot, both of them, with a mask of dust. The sorrel was standing, swaying, head down, and Ranzy Blair was patting his neck and talking to him, unmindful of the manifest hostility of the crowd.

At the wagon, Will said, "It's too late to leave town now, Randall. I'll put the team in the barn and we'll stay all night here. *With* a roof over our head!"

She nodded, dumbly, and sat on the wagon tongue, while Will took the horse to the local barn.

WHILE she sat there waiting, the tall, stern-faced man—Chap Herr—came and stood and looked at her, with a dreadful fierceness in his eyes.

He said, "Did *you* stay all night at Ranzy Blair's place night before last?"

She said, "Yes, we did. Kentucky—"

He made a hopeless gesture and spun on his heel. She watched him walk back to a group of men, tense, close-gathered. His strong clear voice came back to her clearly.

"I guess you're right, men. It looks like Ranzy sold us out—to that girl!"

Randall arose as if on springs. But Will arrived at that moment and he caught her arm and held her.

"Stay away from that crowd!" he hissed. "They're dangerous!"

"But, Will, they think Ranzy threw the race! I know he didn't."

"What made his horse fall?" Will asked significantly. "He had you beat. A horse like that don't just fold up and fall of its own accord, Randall."

She said fiercely, "You don't believe

Ranzy Blair would—would betray his friends!"

He smiled hatefully. "I know when a man's as crazy over a girl as he is over *you,* there ain't anything he won't do to help her. And Ranzy Blair knew that *I* would get plenty, if you won. Now shut up and let's find a room. If we're got to argue about this, let's do it where the whole town won't be listening, watching us."

They found a room over the saloon. There was a back outside stairway, so Randall was saved the humiliation of walking through a saloon full of drunken and roistering men. The room had a front window and she looked down into the street to see their old wagon, over there on the opposite side. It looked so futile and useless now. . . .

Will said, "I'll go down and rustle something for you to eat. You must be hungry—you've not eaten since morning."

She said, "I'm not hungry, Will. But go down and get yourself something."

Her dead despair seemed to frighten him. He seemed eager to get away. She sat by the window and watched the shadows grow long and the street darken. Men roamed that street—shouting, profane men, and some who didn't shout, but moved with a purpose.

The lock behind her clicked and she heard the door open. Without turning from the window she said, "Will, why is there so much shouting and so many men moving on the street?"

In answer, a key turned in the lock, from the inside. She whipped her head about.

There stood Bert Shasta, the gambler, looking just as smoothly diabolical as he had looked that day back there in Kentucky when she had told him, to his face, that *he* was the one responsible for Will's downfall, and that if she were a man she would kill him.

HE TOOK off his hat, now, and smiled—at least he showed his teeth. There was no mirth in his narrowed black eyes. In the dusk of the room, his linen gleamed against the black of his broadcloth suit with startling whiteness.

He said, "We meet again, Miss Eddy! As to that crowd down there, I imagine they're—"

Cold with fury and sick with dread, she stood up. "Get out of my room!" she said. "Get out, or I'll raise this window and scream. And I'll tell whoever comes what a miserable, crawling scoundrel you are—and why you're here!"

That cut him. She saw his eyes go suddenly vicious. But he mastered the violence that showed in his face and smiled again.

"Would you tell them," he said softly, "that your brother was ruled off the Kentucky tracks for crooked riding?"

"I've already told that!" she flashed.

He came a step closer. "Have you told them what made that sorrel horse fall?" he hissed. "No, my dear, I know you haven't told that. And you won't tell it—unless you want to see your brother hung higher than Haaman."

This staggered her. That meeting between this man and Will, last night, on the river. Fear clutched her heart.

"What do you mean?" she asked, dry-lipped and dry-eyed.

"Come off!" he said scornfully. "You know Will slipped a sponge in that sorrel's nose before the race! You were within six feet of him when he did it! No, I don't reckon you'll do any screaming, my dear." He threw his hat on the bed, placed a chair and sat down. He smiled at her again. "We're all set for a long visit, my dear. I've been wanting a chance to talk to *you* for a long time."

Randall fought off the panic within her. This scoundrel knew his advantage, and he was using it. She made herself speak quietly.

"Will may have done *that,*" she said. "I suppose he did. I was a fool not to have thought of it before. But there is one thing my brother will not do—he will not stand to see his sister insulted and mistreated by a scoundrel like you. He'll be back soon with my supper, and he'll kill you if he finds you here."

Shasta leered at her.

"He'll not find me here *tonight,* my dear, for the simple reason that he won't be coming back here tonight. It's been a long time since he's had all the whiskey he wanted, and I instructed my bartender to take care of him properly. So you'd just as well stopping beating your wings against the bars—I beg pardon—against the walls of this room. Because you've got *company,* and that company isn't going to be scared off. Not any!" And he laughed.

RANDALL'S knees failed to hold her. She sat down to conceal this weakness. Shasta apparently mistook the action. He said:

"That's better, much better! Now, if you're sensible, I'll send down for something to eat and drink, and we'll have our own little supper right here—all alone. Why," he said with a show of benevolence, "you're *foolish* to dislike me. I'm not a bad fellow at all. I'll treat you well. I'll even," he showed his teeth in that frightening smile of his, "I'll even *marry* you, if it will make you feel any better."

To herself, Randall said, "I'm lost if I don't outguess him. I must use my head—not lose it!"

So she smiled, and she did a much better job of smiling than Bert Shasta, because women are infinitely better actors than men.

"Then send for something to eat—and drink, Bert. I haven't had a bite since early morning—and not much then. I suppose Will is drunk by this time and has forgotten that I might ever get hungry."

He arose with alacrity. She hoped he would leave her long enough for her to make her escape. But Shasta was not that dense. He simply crossed the room and pushed a button on the wall—and smiled at her evident dismay.

"You didn't notice the button?" he drawled. "It's a special contraption I had rigged up, connecting with the bar. Saves me a lot of running. This is *my* room, by the way."

Beaten in this, Randall still did not give up. She heard steps down the hall and a new surge of hope possessed her. Perhaps it was Will coming back. Then somebody rapped lightly and a voice growled:

"What'll it be, boss?"

Shasta smiled at her and unlocked the door. He pulled it part way open, then quick as a cat tried to slam it to. But the man outside was too quick for him. He came thrusting through, and Bert Shasta, his face white and vicious, leaped back and clawed at his armpit.

Randall saw, then, that it was Will, and he held in his hand that big, old-fashioned Cavalry pistol that their father had carried through the War.

"Shoot, Will! Shoot!" she screamed as Shasta's hand came out, clutching the gambler's favorite weapon, the small but deadly Derringer.

The big pistol in Will Eddy's hand bucked and belched. The force of the concussion blew the door to behind Will Eddy, and the force of the heavy bullet blew Bert Shasta back against the wall, where he hung a moment, then dropped face-down in a sweeping fall.

Will Eddy turned to Randall, his eyes wild.

"Quick!" he said. "Get down to the barn and get on Kentucky. They've already started for Blair's place."

"Who—who—?" she stammered.

"That Herr bunch that backed his horse. They think Blair threw his horse purposely to let you win!"

"Will, *did* you put a sponge in his horse's nose?"

"Yes," he said. "I did. And I'm ready to take the consequences. "But," he said fiercely, "I swear I didn't know this was Shasta's room I was bringin' you to. I swear I didn't, Randall. I got onto his play when the bartender tried to dope me. I may be a dirty crook, Randall, but I'm not dog enough to let a hound like that," he stirred the dead gambler with his toe, contemptuously, "insult and maul my sister!"

"Will—" she breathed. "Will—!"

He said fiercely, "Do you want to see Blair strung up? I tell you they've already *gone!* You've got to ride—ride!"

OUT at the cabin by the river, Ranzy Blair sat at his table, a dead cigarette in his hand, a dead look in his eyes. He heard the approaching hoofbeats, many of them, but he did not even turn his head. He didn't turn it when those horses were pulled up outside his door, and men dismounted and a heavy knock sounded.

"That door isn't barred, boys," he called. "Come on in."

The door was thrust open and Chap Herr's tall form towered there. His sharp aggressive eyes rested on Ranzy Blair, sitting there calm and unmoved.

"Why didn't you take your out?" Herr said hoarsely. "I—"

Behind him, others thrust into the room. Hard men, violent men, with the righteous zeal of defenders of the right burning in their eyes. One of them, a particularly violent-appearing man with a great brush of whiskers covering his face, and shoulders a yard wide, said:

"We gave him his chance, Chap. We told him when we was comin'—and why. He didn't take the chance to get out of the country. If I'd had *my* way, he'd never have been given that chance out."

Chap Herr thrust this man aside and spoke to Ranzy Blair.

"Ranzy," he said, "I loved you like a brother—like a son! I'll still give you a chance to get out of the country, if I have to fight this bunch single-handed. Go on, Ranzy. Fork your horse and *ride!*"

Ranzy Blair said quietly, "Not runnin', Chap. I came to this country seekin' a new life, and I found it—with your help. If I have to lose it, I want to lose it here. I'm not runnin'."

The bearded man caught Chap Herr's arm and pulled him toward the door.

"Get out, Chap," he said, with a rough kindness. "We don't need you. Go on, get out of here. We'll attend to this business ourselves."

The others joined him, and Chap Herr was pushed out of the room and the door closed against him. His horse's hoofs sounded, beating a furious roll, as he rode madly away from that spot.

Ranzy Blair faced these men. He said, "Boys, I see you've brought a rope. I've got a favor to ask."

"We didn't come to grant favors, we come to hang you!" said the bearded man bluntly.

"You can get me—I know that," Ranzy said. "But I can get some of you, too, before I go under. I want to go out like a man, boys, if I've got to go—not like a common horse-thief!"

"You're worse than a thief!" growled the bearded man. "You doublecrossed the best friend you ever—"

"You're a liar, Holcomb!" said Ranzy clearly. "I never doublecrossed a man in my life. I didn't throw that horse. Anybody that says I did is a

liar—do you hear? A liar! You're all liars!"

THE bearded man jerked out his six-shooter. "Damn you!" he snarled. "That's temptin' fate *too* far!"

He cocked the gun and leveled it at Ranzy Blair's head. One of the others struck the gun aside.

The bearded man glared angrily at him.

"What the hell!" he cried. "You going to take insults from that cheatin' fool? He called me a liar—called all of us liars. I'm for shootin'—"

"Pipe down!" the man who had struck down the gun snapped.

"But didn't he ask for it, callin'—"

The man scowled.

"Can't you see he's tryin' to cheat the rope?" he said harshly.

The bearded man stared at Ranzy. "Well, I'll be—" He jammed the gun back into the holster. "Well, let's—"

A man near the door suddenly turned and snatched it open. Hoof beats, coming furiously, swelled and grew. Then Chap Herr's voice was roaring:

"Hold up—hold up!" and then Chap Herr hit the ground and came lunging through the door. He saw Ranzy Blair still sitting there, unmoved, then turned back and said, "Come on in, ma'am. We're in time!"

Randall stepped through the door and looked straight into Ranzy Blair's eyes. She spoke to him, and him alone.

"It's all right, Ranzy. Will did it. He put a sponge in your horse's nose. Bribed by Shasta. And he was man enough to own up when he found—when he—"

The bearded man snatched at her arm. "What about Shasta? What about that devil?"

The others crowded around.

"What was that?" they cried.

"Shasta is dead," Randall answered. "My brother—killed him."

"Your brother killed—?"

"Yes," Randall said.

Chap Herr seemed to grow six inches in height. His face was absolutely transfigured.

"Boys," he said, "I told you Ranzy couldn't do that!" He took one great step toward Ranzy Blair and put out his hand. "Will you shake hands with me, Ranzy?" he asked humbly.

Ranzy Blair gripped the big man's hand, and Randall turned away from the scene, to hide the quick tears that sprang into her eyes.

"It's all right, Chap!" she heard Ranzy say, his voice choked a little.

The other men stood about then, uncertain. They looked at Ranzy Blair, stricken, and then they looked questioningly at one another. One started to go to Ranzy Blair, and then fell back, flushing with shame and uncertainty. Finally, one man shrugged, and blurted out the thought of all:

"No use," he said. "Ain't nothin' we can say, I reckon, after—"

"Reckon that's right," they said. "Let's get out o' here!"

The men were filing out then, subdued, deeply ashamed. Chap Herr was last. He closed the door behind him firmly.

They were alone in the cabin again, and Ranzy Blair was looking at her with eyes that couldn't believe what they saw.

"Randall," he said, "surely—*surely* you can't go on after this—after all this! Surely your brother—"

She said, "I don't think I could have gone on even if it hadn't happened, Ranzy. Now I *know* I won't—unless you want me to."

He came to her instantly. Something struck the door a hard sharp blow. Ranzy Blair raised his head.

"What's that?" he whispered.

"Only Kentucky," she replied. She looked into his eyes and whispered, "She—she won't care, Ranzy!"

Trouble In Dry Valley

By JAMES CLYDE HARPER

Jim leaped in front of Lucy and whipped his gun up.

You can't have a spread without water, or love without kisses—although Lucy Sanders had both.

LUCY SANDERS started in surprise as the three men rode out of the bushes that flanked the rough little wagon road. They blocked the trail, forced her and her brother, Frank, to halt. As Lucy recognized the big leader, her surprise vanished. Anger flashed into her eyes, flushed her smooth, young cheeks.

"Get them, Frank!" she cried. Her hand darted for the little thirty-eight that nestled snugly at her supple waist. Frank's gun hand matched her motion. But they were no match for the gun-swift trio. Hands dipped,

rose. Cold, ugly muzzles poked at them. Lucy and Frank slowly brought their hands away from their guns.

"You're smart," said big Curry Allison. "Keep on bein' that way." He motioned. One of the men rode nearer to take Frank's gun. Allison approached Lucy to get her little Colts. "We're takin' you both back into the hills to give yore brother a chance to talk. I reckon you both know what I want. If he talks, you won't git hurt. If he ain't willin' to talk. . ." Allison licked his lips as he feasted his eyes on her well-knit young body that was enticing despite her mannish range garb. His stare traveled from her Stetson-clad head down to her rounded limbs, firm and plump in the legs of her trousers as she sat her saddle. His eyes narrowed suddenly, glinting with fire.

LUCY shuddered under his gaze. He was unkempt, repulsive, his face and eyes marked from dissipation and loose living. Ugh!

"You'll git used to me in time," Allison leered, "if yore brother ain't willin' to talk. Baby, me an' you'll have fun. . ." Allison reached toward her with both hands, one to take her little Colts; the other to touch her warm shoulder.

"Dam you, hombre!" Frank snarled, but the gunman instantly was beside him, taking his Colts, sneering, daring Frank to offer resistance.

But instead of shrinking back from the gun leader's questing hands, Lucy suddenly spun into action. She grasped one of his arms. She jerked, yelled, brought up her right hand in a hard, overhand haymaker. Her yell frightened Allison's horse, made it shy away. Her grip on his arm helped unseat him, too, and her right hand, landing on his whiskey-reddened nose, completed the job. Allison, nose bleeding, sprawled in the road.

Lucy gigged her little paint filly at the third man who blocked the road. He attempted to jerk up his gun, but surprise of her attack was Lucy's salvation. Her horse banged into the gunman's mount, jarred it heavily, almost knocked it down. Instead of using his guns, the man was forced to grab leather to stay on. By the time he had straightened the horse around, Lucy's little pinto was scooting away at cyclonic speed.

Frank Sanders yelled, spurred, attempted to follow her, but the man beside him clubbed his gun on Frank's head, knocked him out of the saddle. But Frank's buckskin, frightened by the hubbub and the spur thrust in its sides, took off after Lucy like a scared rabbit.

Allison staggered to his feet, cursing, fingering his bleeding nose. "Git her, dammit. Git her, you hombres!"

The two men fed steel to their mounts, whipped after Lucy. Their mounts were larger, longer-legged. They began creeping up on Lucy. She peeked back over her shoulder, drew her little peacemaker. But accurate shooting from a racing horse was impossible. The two crept nearer, nearer. One began firing over her head, not trying to hit her, merely trying to excite her and spoil her aim. The other pursuer was swinging his lariat, creeping closer, just about ready for the cast. Fear tightened Lucy's throat.

They sped around a bend in the road. Fifty yards ahead, a tall man jerked his big dun-colored horse to a quick stop, stared. His hand automatically dropped to his holster as he watched them sweep down on him. Lucy saw that movement of his gun hand, twisted around. Allison employed a half dozen hard-case hombres. This probably was another of them.

Lucy triggered. She saw the tall rider's head jerk, could almost hear his shout. Then his gun leveled. She threw herself over to one side of her

straining mount's neck, just as the gun blasted almost in her face. She felt a savage jerk at her head. That bullet was close. The man had shot off her hat, left her golden, wavy hair streaming in the wind.

At sight of her hair, he started as if he had been slapped. His gun muzzle dropped. His lips framed words of stunned surprise, as she sped past: "What th' . . . A woman!"

Then she was speeding for a protective bend in the trail fifty yards away. From behind, a fourth horse took up the chase, then as quickly stopped. Lucy glanced back. The newcomer was pulling Frank's buckskin to a halt, turning, blocking the trail, forcing Allison's two men to halt. Lucy almost sobbed in relief as she sped around the trail bend.

She pulled up the panting filly, left the trail, and rode into bushes. She wormed her way back through the bushes, holding her thirty-eight in readiness. She was curious to know more about the stranger; she wondered if she could, in some way, effect Frank's escape.

THE rope thrower was going back down the road, coiling his loop, glancing over his shoulder. Allison's other rider was talking to the stranger. Lucy was too far to hear, but she noted Allison's man retained his weapons. The tall rider apparently had holstered his gun while catching the buckskin. Lucy frowned and hastily filled the empty cylinders of her thirty-eight as she guided her pony carefully through the bushes. She might have to effect a rescue of the stranger now, too, since they had the drop on him.

She left her mount in the bushes, slipped toward the spot where they'd accosted her and Frank. The tall stranger was being herded before Allison as she came near enough to hear. Lucy stifled a sudden desire to snicker when she noted the damage she had done to Allison's big nose.

"This hombre," she heard Allison's gunman say, "blocked us, caught th' buckskin. He won't give it up."

"No?" Allison's voice was hostile. "I don't like folks pokin' their noses in my business, feller."

The tall man grinned. He was facing Lucy. She suddenly liked that grin, and the casual way he glanced around. He pushed back his hat, leaned forward, propped his arms on the saddle-horn. Lucy lowered her gun. Somehow, she had an idea this stranger wasn't the kind to need much help. He appeared as if he'd been accustomed to getting into tight spots like this—and getting out again.

Suddenly, his gaze appeared to wander, to dart up toward her. For a fleeting instant, Lucy felt as if his stare was bridging the hundred feet that separated them, was penetrating her flimsy bush screen. As quickly as he had glanced up, his gaze dropped.

"Looks to me," said the stranger, an amused undercurrent in his voice, "like you've done already poked yore nose in somebody's business."

Allison ripped out a string of oaths, went for his gun. But the stranger made no move, just sat there, a quiet, sardonic grin on his lips. Allison moved his hand from his gun with an oath.

"I reckon you've seen too much fer yore own good, mister," he said ominously.

The tall man's grin slowly faded. A glint like the chill of thick, deep ice came into his eyes. When he spoke, his voice held a flat, steely hardness.

"I'm still seein', hombre. Th' lady was ridin' a Slash S hoss, th' same as this buckskin. They's blood on th' ground there which you forgot to cover up after you drug th' body into them bushes, Long-Face. I've heard of th' Slash S outfit. I reckon that's Frank Sanders you drug into them bushes, eh, Long-Face? I see you

tote an extra Colt in yore waistband."

No one said anything. Lucy could see Allison start at the correct way the stranger sized up things. She expected Allison to draw his gun, blast the man from his saddle. She lifted her thirty-eight, waited for the stranger to make his play.

But the stranger didn't. Instead, he carelessly wrapped the bridle reins around the saddle-horn, leaned over, patted the horse's shoulder. For the first time, Lucy gave more than fleeting attention to the horse. It was an animal to excite the envy and admiration of any rangebred person. Big, rangy, unmarred except for a seared hairless strip on its right hip, it was a fit match for its tall, broad-shouldered owner.

"Yeah, you've seen too much," Allison decided coldly. "Git yore paws up, feller. Take his gun, Britt. Then close his trap. Dump him behind them rocks. If th' buzzards don't beat us back, we'll bury him later, after we finish with Sanders."

Britt, the rope twirler, rode near, took the man's gun. Lucy frowned, puzzled. Wasn't he going to resist? Then she saw the expression on his face. He was grinning. There was mischief mixed with his grin. It puzzled her, made her wonder.

Britt tossed aside the man's guns and dismounted. He drew a long-bladed, wicked looking knife. It made less noise, attracted less attention than a gun. He grinned at the mounted man.

"Git down, hombre. I'll let you walk over to th' rocks on yore own legs."

"Sure," the tall man said, and Lucy thought he turned his head purposefully. Was it to hide a chuckle?

He twisted in the saddle, brought his right leg from the stirrup. But instead of lifting it high to clear as he brought it across the dun's back, he suddenly jabbed down, hard. His long-shanked spur bit deeply into the dun's hip. Right in the center of that seared, hairless strip. With a quick intake of breath, the dun squatted, quivered. The spur dug again. And with a loud squeal, the horse reacted.

Snorting, squealing, hoofs flaying the air, the big smoke-colored dun went berserk. Twisting, kicking, pawing at the sky, fighting the ground, it became a swirling whirlwind of maddened fury.

The tall man was pitched off during the first buck. But he was prepared and alighted on his feet. He ducked out of the way, grinning, for Allison and his two henchman had been caught unawares.

They didn't have time to draw and shoot; they didn't have time to think. They dodged back, tried to evade those threshing forefeet. Allison and the long-faced man were hurled off their feet, guns knocked from them. Britt, the knife knocked from his grasp, tried to twist out of danger. But the big dun smacked him on the shoulder. Britt lost his balance. He was slow recovering. The smoke-colored horse's threshing feet landed solidly in Britt's chest. Ribs gave and the man screamed, fell.

ALMOST as quickly as it started, it ended. The smoke horse plunged to a quivering stop thirty feet away, wall-eyed, sweat-coated nostrils wide and flaring. The stranger quickly gathered up the dropped weapons of the trio. Watching them, he walked to the horse, talking softly, soothingly. Gradually the big dun lost its frightened manner. It stopped quivering, but the man kept on talking, rubbing its shoulders, scratching its ears. The horse turned its head, nuzzled the man's shoulder.

Allison and the long-faced gunman scrambled out of the bushes. Britt couldn't get up. Allison swore luridly as he stood there, his skin gouged and bleeding from the bush branches.

"I'll kill that damned cayuse," Allison promised, furiously. "I'll burn its damn eyes out with a hot poker."

"Try it and you'll really see some hell," Lucy heard the man say dryly. "Lightning struck him when he was a colt, an' th' sight of fire or a touch on that lightning burn on his hip makes him plumb crazy. But I reckon you know about that, don't you?"

The man motioned with his gun, ordered the pair to bring Sanders from the bushes. Lucy started at the sight of the long, jagged scalp wound. She half arose, meant to go down and take charge of Frank. But she held back. This tall newcomer, for a stranger, was taking a very active part in happenings around here. She'd just wait and see what else he meant to do.

The pair roped Frank on the buckskin, moved back. The stranger tied all their guns on his saddle, gathered up the reins of two of their horses.

"I'm leavin' one bronc so's you can git that Britt hombre to a doc. He needs one after takin' Smoky's feet in his brisket. I would leave all yore horses, but if I did you'd take out after me instead of carin' for that feller. I ain't in th' mood to keep on playin' with you fellers right now. Later, mebby I will, if you're still in th' notion."

Big Curry Allison sneered, fists clenched. "Talk's cheap, feller, when you've got th' whip hand."

"You're right," was the reply. "So I'll shut up."

Lucy waited until she saw he was riding south. The Sanders ranch was in that direction.

Then she hurried over the ridge top, got her little pinto, and keeping to the bushes, rode parallel to the road, but far enough away so as not to attract his attention, yet near enough to note his progress, through occasional openings in the bushes and stunted hill pine and cedar.

AFTER he had gone about a mile, he halted. Lucy immediately quit her mount, crept down the ridge, crouched at the edge of the trail, behind a bush. The man looped the reins of the Allison horses over saddle-horns, slapped the broncs on their rumps, started them north. They'd find their way home.

He turned, dug papers and tobacco out of his pocket, built a cigarette. Without haste, he rolled the cigarette, applied the match. He took a long draw, exhaled.

"You can come on out, Miss Sanders," he said quietly. "It's better ridin' in th' road than duckin' an' weavin' through them bushes."

For a moment Lucy was motionless. He . . . he'd known she was there all the time. And she thought she'd slipped up on him. She stood up, parted the bushes, walked out into the road.

They didn't say anything for a few moments. Lucy found herself gazing into a pair of gray, level, unwavering eyes. There was a grin on his lips. It was a comradely, friendly grin. Lucy impulsively felt that she could like this man.

"I . . . I want to thank you for what you've done," she said.

He accepted her thanks with a wave of his hand. "Glad to do it. Sorry about that shot I took at you. Didn't mean to take part at all until you shot at me. Reckoned then I'd better save my own hide."

Lucy smiled. "I'm thankful it was my hat instead of my head you hit." She remembered the way he'd jerked when she shot at him, peered closer at his head. His left ear was bleeding slightly, the lobe nicked. Regret flooded her face. "Oh, I'm sorry. You . . . you should be awfully angry."

He shrugged. "Don't let it bother you. Nothin' more'n a barb wire scratch. I reckon you'd better git your bronc, an' we'd better be gettin'

your brother home. He's got a pretty bad scalp wound, an' needs some doctorin' pronto."

There was nothing more to do, so Lucy went for her horse. When she got back, he was mounted, watching the back trail.

"Don't reckon they'll try anything yet, at least not until they git some more guns," he remarked as they rode on southward, "but you never can tell about his kind." He turned to her suddenly and grinned. "In case you're interested, Miss Sanders, I'm Jim Gordon. From nowhere in particular, goin' nowhere in particular. You are Miss Sanders, ain't you?"

"Yes." She leaned over, extended her hand. "I'm glad to know you . . . Jim."

Her grip was firm, her smile friendly. Admiration, at first guarded and held in leash, broke through and shone boldly in Jim's eyes. It brought a quick flush to Lucy's cheeks, made her avert her gaze. A sudden pleasant little tingle crept into her. The worry and trouble she and Frank had known lately, was swiftly swept into the background. She didn't know much about Jim Gordon; didn't know where he was from, what he was, who he was. But that wasn't necessary. She knew him. That was all that was necessary. Somehow, now that Jim was here, things were going to turn out all right. And if they didn't—well, Jim was still here.

"I . . . I hope there's some way I can repay you for what you've done," she told him, smiling, as they rode along.

"You can," he said gravely, "by wearin' that new hat I'm going to buy you for the one I shot off."

"There never was a woman," she responded lightly, "who could refuse the offer of a new hat, even a Stetson!"

IT was late afternoon when they got to the Slash S ranch house. They put Frank to bed, cleansed and bandaged his scalp. Although he had taken a hard blow and was still unconscious, he hadn't lost much blood and would recover. By the time they had finished, it was growing dusky dark. Lucy told Jim to feed and water the horses while she fixed supper. Both were hungry, and ate without saying much.

When they had finished, Jim made a cigarette, lounged back in his chair.

"It's none of my business," he said abruptly, "but I'd like to know what's your trouble with Allison."

"Rustling, mostly, until the attack today on us," she said quietly. "Three years ago we moved to this valley—dad, Frank and myself. We did all right the first year, then about the middle of the second year, dad died. He was hurt while trying to doctor a crippled steer. The animal broke the hogging strings, thrust a horn into dad's chest. He lived only about two weeks after it happened. He died just about the time that Allison and his rustling gun-crew holed up over in the Sawtooths. Our cattle immediately began to tally short. Frank and I rode the range day and night, armed, ready to offer resistance. But we never found anything." Lucy got up, filled their coffee cups, set the coffee pot back on the stove.

"Just about six months ago, to make matters worse, the range suddenly went dry. The creeks and springs quit flowing completely, and we had just as much snow and rain this past winter and spring as ever before. Frank decided something unusual had happened, and went into the hills. He discovered that through some freak of nature, perhaps a small landslide or because of underground erosion, the mountain feeder stream had been turned into an underground channel. Frank came back two weeks ago with the news, but just a day or so before he did, the creeks and springs suddenly flowed again, then

just as suddenly stopped. Just like you'd turn on a water faucet, then turn it off again. Frank did that, and said he could have the creeks and springs flowing normally again, anytime he wished."

"That's why Allison jumped you, eh, to make Frank tell how to turn on the water?"

"Yes. You see, we've got what is left of our herd back over in the east range. There's a little water there, and it's pretty far away for Allison to rustle. So Frank decided to let the range stay dry and waterless until Allison was forced to leave the valley."

Gordon finished his coffee. "Well, all you've got to do is sit tight an' wait for Frank to git well, and for Allison to leave. When he does that you'll . . ."

"But he ain't," rasped a voice from the back door.

With a little gasp, Lucy leaped from her chair. Her hand quickly darted to put out the lamp on the table. As suddenly she stopped. For from behind Gordon was an ominous click, then a gun muzzle prodded his back.

"If you touch that lamp, I'll bust his spine," said the man. A hand jerked Jim's Colts from the holsters. "Git away from that table, gal, an' you can crawl on yore hind feet, feller."

Gordon arose, turned. It was the long-faced rope thrower. Another man accompanied him.

Long-Face grinned at Jim. "You tromped on Allison's feelin's too hard. You an' yore cayuse. He's got a special party planned fer you. Let's go, hombre. He's waitin'." He shoved Jim toward the door, and outside.

The other man sat down at the table. "Take it easy," he grinned at Lucy. "You ain't gonna git hurt if you behave. I'm jist here to keep you company until yore brother wakes up. Then Curry's startin' over where he left off this afternoon."

Lucy grew pale a moment, then her cheeks took on natural color as her mind began to function. Frank would be safe, as long as he was unconscious. But Jim wouldn't. They'd take Jim back into the hills, torture him, then kill him. Something had to be done, quick. Appeal to the law was out of the question. It was thirty miles to town and the sheriff. They'd have finished with Jim before she could get there and back. Lucy's little hands doubled into fists, and she felt a sudden desire to scream.

Because there was nothing better to do, and doing anything was better than just standing and thinking, Lucy began clearing away the dishes. Her guard made no motion to stop her, just cautioned her about keeping away from the light, which he placed on a chair over beside the wall. Lucy washed and stacked the dishes in the wall cabinet. As she was putting away the cups and saucers, her gaze flitted across a small round bottle. Immediately, her stare came back in fixed intentness. She gave a slight start, then her deft fingers moved swiftly. her body concealing them from the guard's eyes. Suddenly, she turned, smiled at him. She held two cups and saucers in her hands.

"There's just about enough coffee left for two," she said. "You might as well help me drink it as pour it out. Would you like a cup?"

The man regarded her an instant, then shrugged. "Shore. Why not?"

Lucy quickly filled the two cups, handed one to the guard. He sampled it, made a wry face. "Kind of bitter, ain't it?"

"It's the heat," said Lucy quickly. "It's dried out the coffee, made it stale. Here, let me give you some sugar. There, taste that now."

He did. "That's more like it," he grunted, and drained the cup.

A ONE-ROOM, rough-board shack deep in the Sawtooth Mountains was the goal of Jim's guard. Two men

waited there, one short and red-faced, the other tall and bearded. Jim's guard called them Pete and Huff.

"Allison said to wait," the one called Huff stated when they were inside. "He's gone to take Britt to th' hole cabin. Red went to stay with Britt. Curry don't want Britt lyin' around handy in case anybody comes nosin' about."

"How is Britt, Huff?" asked Long-Face.

"Bad. Chest caved in." Tall, bearded Huff glared at Jim. "We're gonna let yore wild bronc give you a dose of th' same medicine, hombre. Tie you to his tail, rub his tender spot, an' watch th' fun."

They didn't tie Jim. They took the cartridges from his gun, tossed it on the rough table, sat back, staring, hoping Jim would try and make a break. Jim sat facing the door, Huff and Pete between it and him. Long-Face added another chunk of wood to the fire in the little box heater to ward off the mountain chill. Then he sat down at the table, toyed with a greasy deck in a game of solitaire.

A sudden movement at the door made Jim stiffen. He expected to see Allison stride into the room. But the shadow did not enter. Instead, it cautiously took form. It was Lucy!

Jim's blood turned icy. But he caught himself, quickly bent his head to hide his surprise. The gun trio didn't move, didn't change expression. They hadn't noticed. Tugging his hatbrim to shade his stare, Jim again studied the door. Lucy was signaling. Her shadow-darkened face looked questioningly. Did he understand? Jim carelessly readjusted his hatbrim, using the motion to cloak his quick nod. Instantly she vanished.

Seconds passed. Then pistol shots rang out. Hoofs thudded. The horses were being stampeded. The three leaped for the door, hands streaking for guns. Only Pete remembered, whirled back. But he was too late. For with their first motion, Jim Gordon leaped for the table. He knocked over the lamp, threw the room in darkness. In the same motion, he caught up his gun, dived behind the stove. He lay flat on the floor, pulling cartridges from his gun belt, filling his Colts.

Flame stabbed at him. But the lead plunked harmlessly into the walls. A fusillade shook the room again. Then a roaring curse drowned the gunfire.

"Stop it!" It was Long-Face, snarling in pain. "You hit me. Outside an' guard th' door. Pete, find who spooked our broncs."

They ducked out. Gordon crept from behind the stove. He touched flesh. He clutched hard, started to strike.

"It's me, Lucy." She whispered just in time. "I slipped in while they were shooting. Did they hit you?"

"Naw. How'd you git here?"

"We'd better block that door. Use everything not nailed down." Then she answered, as they worked. "Gave my guard a cup of coffee. Only it had some sleeping tablets in it. Some left that we had to give dad to ease his pain just before he died. Then I took the guard's horse, gave it a free rein, and it brought me here."

"What a girl!" Impulsively Jim groped for her hand, found it. He could feel the warmth of her lovely, slender body. The fragrance of her hair was in his nostrils. Her hand was firm in his palm. Her touch was electrifying to Jim, sent the blood surging hot and fast through his body. He laughed, a little unsteadily, drew her closer, started to speak. But at that instant bootheels clomped up to the door. A gun butt pounded.

"Come out, Gordon. This time I'm crackin' th' whip. Come out an' we won't harm th' gal. Otherwise we're gunnin' you both out." It was Allison. The gun leader had returned from the hole cabin.

Lucy moved quickly before Jim could reply. "Here's your answer, Allison. I hope I drill you center between the eyes!"

Her gun roared. Lead crashed through the door, nicked Allison. He swore and leaped back, then bawled an order, unlimbered his sixgun. Lead crashed into the building. Bullets tore through the rough board walls. One slug knifed Jim's cheek; another cut his leg.

"You've certainly started the ball rollin'," Jim declared, pulling her down on the floor. But there was admiration in his voice. "Keep down low. I reckon we're in for it, unless we pick off a few of them pronto. So here goes."

He crawled to the front wall, took his knife and gouged out a peephole between two of the boards. Outside a shadow moved. Jim smashed two quick shots. A man howled, darted for more secure cover.

"Jim, toss me your knife." Lucy was on the other side of the door, up at the front wall.

"Get back an' stay down low like I told you," commanded Jim. "You'll git hit up here."

"Give me that knife or I'll kick off a board!"

"I believe you would, at that," Jim grinned, handing over the knife. "Say, you could have given Bell Starr and them other frontier women a few pointers on how to be tough!"

She didn't answer because she was hacking at the wall. In a few seconds her thirty-eight was adding to the din. She gave a sudden gasp, sagged from the wall. Then she dived back, and her gun yammered until it was empty. Outside, a man screamed, fell from behind a bush. "That'll teach him, I guess," she said laconically. "He nicked my ear, just like I did yours. He won't do it any more."

It was quiet outside, ominously quiet. They could hear feet scraping the ground, muffled voices. Jim glued his eye to the peephole. He couldn't see any moving thing and started over to take a look through Lucy's peephole. He was almost to her when it happened.

A charging avalanche struck the door, shook the house. The wood splintered, gave. Piled chairs and the table were knocked back. Men stood in the doorway. Two in front, hugging the short log they'd used as a battering ram. Allison in the background, crouched, gun palmed.

Huff and Pete dropped the log, whipped gun hands down. Jim leaped in front of Lucy, brought his Colts up. Guns crashed with ear-splitting loudness. Hot lead burned into Jim. They were cursing, firing. Jim flinched as lead again ripped into his body. Behind, Lucy gave a little cry, slumped on the floor.

Jim Gordon laughed, wildly. Crouched before her, braced against the numbing shock of snarling lead, he turned his gun loose. Huff screamed, clawed at his bullet-ripped face. Pete was going down, cursing, blubbering, dying. Big Curry Allison lurched drunkenly as lead smashed into his big body.

"Damn you, Gordon . . .!" Allison fought forward a step, his Colts raising, leveling. But Jim Gordon's gun spoke first. Allison's rasping voice choked. His gun fell from death-stricken fingers. Then Curry Allison sagged to the floor, drilled in the forehead.

BLEEDING in a dozen places, Jim Gordon shook his head to clear away the dizziness. He groped for Lucy, found her. She was not still and lifeless. She was sitting up, nursing her right foot, fumbling over the floor for her thirty-eight.

"I thought you were hurt!" Jim exclaimed in surprise.

"Hurt nothing! Allison shot off my boot heel and I lost my balance. Then I dropped my gun. And you ended

things so fast I didn't have a chance to find it and fight back. Darn it!"

Jim Gordon sat down and laughed. Some girl, Lucy Sanders! The kind to tie to, to ride the river with. He looked at her. She looked at him. Neither spoke. For, unexplainably, there was no need for words. Just a long, deep, intent look. In that moment, as they sat there looking at each other by the flickering light from the little box heater, Jim Gordon and Lucy Sanders welded the past and present into the future—their future.

"I wonder," she said at length, gay, mischievous, laughing, "if you will?"

"Will what?"

"Make the rest of our life as interesting as you have our first day together."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," grinned Jim Gordon. He forgot his wounds. He reached for her, drew her warm, eager body close. "Just wait until we're patched up an' find a preacher. Gimme a kiss an' let's start huntin' one, huh?"

With a quick, happy little nod, Lucy raised her lips to him. And in the fervency of that kiss, Lucy knew there was no need now, nor would there ever be any, to doubt the sincerity of Jim's love for her.

Montana Bill

By JOHN CALVERT

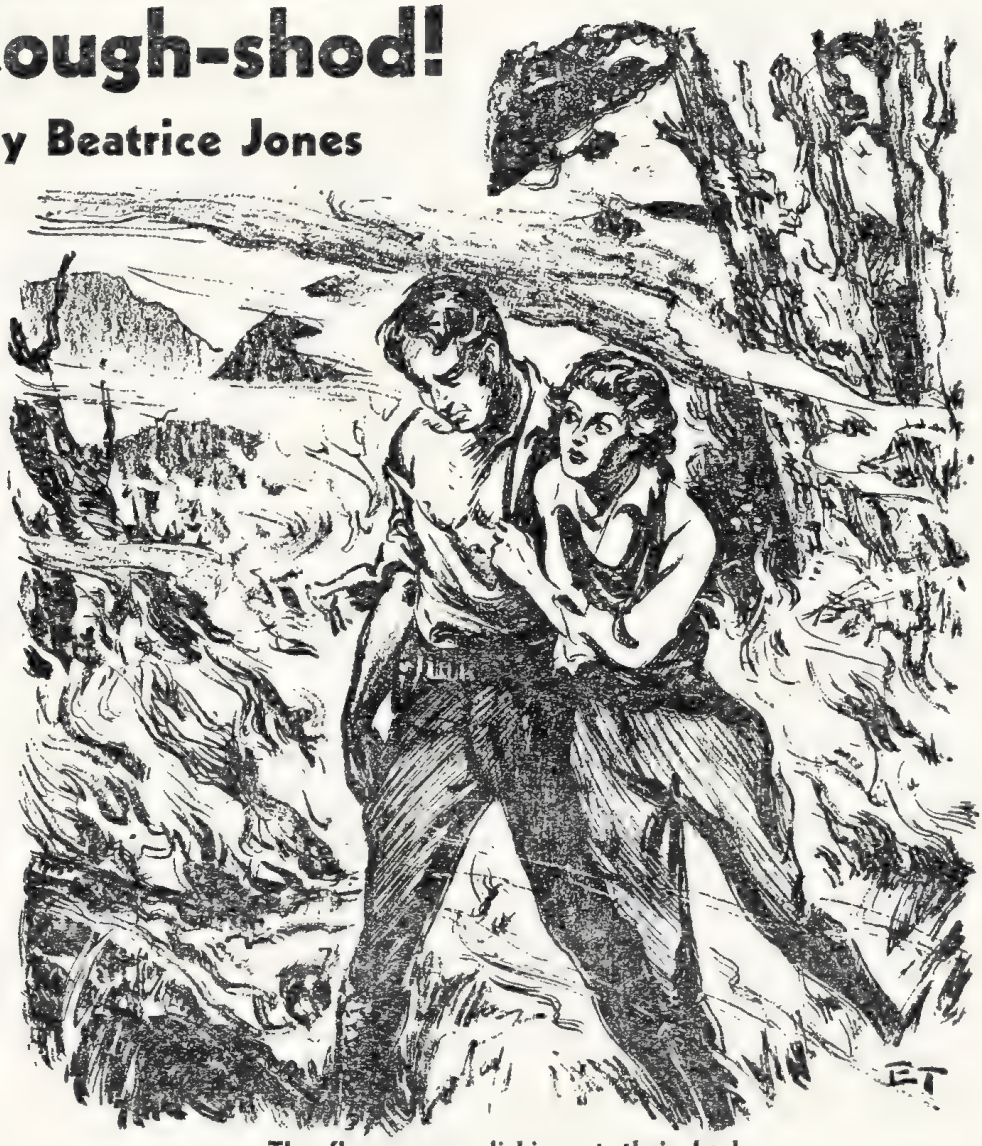
ON a white-maned, dancing pinto—
A pony plenty smart—
Montana Bill came ridin'
And roped Anita's heart.

He was just a driftin' cowpoke,
A ridin', ropin' fool,
With little enough of learnin'
In anybody's school—

But he loved the creaking saddle,
And he savvied prairie ways,
So he roped his rangeland sweetheart
For all his days!

Love Rides Rough-shod!

By Beatrice Jones



The flames were licking at their heels. Both of them knew they couldn't make it!

Out of the crackling of flame and the billowing blackness of smoke came sudden joy. For Linda knew—knew beyond doubt—

LINDA started guiltily at the sound of Carter Grant's voice. And when she turned to face the big Forest Reserve man, her little heart-shaped face was flushed with confusion, her dark eyes bright still with the memory of Don Gilbey's kiss. For on this very spot, last night, Don had told her he loved her.

She was a little angry with herself for feeling guilty about it now, as she faced Carter. After all, there was no reason why she shouldn't fall in love with Don.

"What you got up in Sunrise Valley, Linda?" Carter said abruptly. Tall and blond, broad-shouldered and very tan, the blue of his eyes the color of the sky, he stood there waiting for her reply, turning his big Stetson round and round in lean, strong-fingered hands.

When the abrupt question finally registered on her mind, Linda's eyes widened in surprise.

"Nothing," she said, then added immediately: "That is, I haven't anything there. I rented the range to Don Gilbey, early in the spring. He wanted to graze his breeding cattle in there."

Carter was frowning a little as he listened, watching her face intently.

"Why?" Linda asked.

Carter turned away, looked out over the trail that wound up a hill, then dropped down into Sunrise Valley.

"Nothing," he said. "I noticed smoke rising up from there last night. Thought it might be a fire and rode over to investigate. There was a Mexican at the pass with a rifle; he wouldn't let me into the valley. Didn't answer any of my questions, but looked as if he would shoot if I tried to ride past him."

Linda was silent for a moment. It was a strange occurrence. It had been so long since anyone had carried a gun in the Valley country that the very word "gun" was a little shocking. Years ago, her own father and the other ranchers who had settled in the Valley country had fought grim battles with rustling outlaws. But they had long ago been driven out, and peace had held forth there ever since.

Linda frowned, a little puzzled.

She said finally, "I guess Don's got some of his men up there to keep guard on his breed stock. He's new to this country, you know, and I guess he doesn't know that guns aren't needed."

IT WAS the blast of a gun that broke into her words now. For a moment she and Carter stared at one another, her dark eyes wide, startled; his suddenly tense, grim.

Then they both turned in the direction of the gunfire—toward Sunrise Valley. After a moment Carter turned toward his big horse. Linda saw the Forest Reserve man's lean hand drop to the butt of the gun in the hip holster he wore—because of his job, Carter carried a gun as part of his equipment, although few of the other men in this country did, except when on a long ride.

"What are you going to do?" Linda said, a little shiver of premonition gripping her.

Carter's voice was calm, steady. "Going up to see what the shooting is about. You ride on back to the house, honey, and I'll stop by on my way down and tell you what it's all about. Like as not, somebody spotted a deer and got a sudden appetite for venison."

Linda mounted her own horse after watching the Reserve man ride away up the trail. Undoubtedly Carter was right about the shot.

As she rode toward the house, the troubled premonition left her and she turned once more to thinking of Don Gilbey, waiting impatiently for the night, when he would come again to hold her in his arms, to kiss her, to tell her once more of his love—to plan for their future.

Their discovery of love was but a day old. Last night Don had held her in his arms for the first time. He had found her along the Sunrise Valley trail, at her favorite spot, and it had seemed the most natural thing in the world when he had pulled her gently from her saddle, clasped her to him, and kissed her hungrily.

She had been a little frightened at first by his ardor, by the boldness of his lovemaking. But his kisses had soon dispelled any thought of fear.

his feverish intensity had been transmitted to her.

Last night they had been too concerned with the discovery of their love to make any plans for the future. Don hadn't even asked her to marry him, but everything he had said, had done, had taken that for granted.

With wide, excited eyes, Linda stared at herself in the mirror of her bedroom dresser, when she got back to the house, thought of the future, of the cattle empire that would be hers and Don's, after they were married. Together they would bring prosperity back to Sunrise Valley, by combining her herds and her rangeland with Don's expensive breed cattle.

Those cattle, he had told her, were all he had managed to save out of a five-year drought, which had lost him his ranch down in the Rio Grande Valley and sent him further into the northwest, looking for grazing land.

THAT evening, after supper, Linda dressed in her newest dress—a soft, dotted swiss that she had made herself. Her dark curly hair had been cut to shoulder length for comfort, and she tied it back with a blue ribbon, to match the dots in the white swiss.

The moon was rising, white and serene, behind the hills as she walked up the trail to Sunrise Valley. Don would come from that direction, to meet her where they had been last night.

As she approached the spot where she had met Carter Grant that afternoon, she recalled that the big Forest Ranger hadn't stopped by the house to tell her the source of that rifle-shot, as he had promised to do. In the excitement of preparing for Don's coming that evening, she had forgotten Carter.

Maybe Carter was still up at Don's camp in the valley. Maybe he would ride down with Don. But that thought reminded her that Carter seemed to dislike Don, in his odd, silent way, as much as Don, always outspoken, admitted disliking Carter. Linda hadn't thought much about that before. Don had been in the valley only about three months, but during that time he and Carter had had several arguments about Carter's patrolling Sunrise Valley.

A tall figure loomed suddenly up before her on the trail, stepping quietly out of the growth of scrubby trees that bordered it. For an instant Linda was startled. Then the blood began to pound in her head, and her heart beat that wild tattoo. Don had been waiting for her in the same spot!

He stopped just within the shadows at the edge of the trail, when she thrust two arms out and ran through the moonlight toward him. Her hands touched the rough cotton shirt, slipped up to his neck. Her face lifted, her eyes closed for his kiss.

She felt cool lips on her mouth, strong arms about her. She was being crushed against a firm, hard chest. Her heart was thudding in time to the pound of another heart, close against her own.

It was fully a minute before she realized that something was different. The kiss was complete, thrilling so. She felt secure suddenly, safe. But something—something was strange!

Like a flash it came to her. The feverishness, the ruthless hunger of last night's kiss was gone. This was a tender kiss; these arms were tender in their strength. Even though they held her as close, they did not bruise, did not crush.

Then he moved his lips from hers and spoke, and she knew what had happened. It wasn't Don she had kissed—it was Carter Grant!

BEFORE he could speak, she cried, "Carter! I didn't know it was you. I thought it was—" She broke

off, as he stiffened, drew away from her, his arms falling to his sides.

"You thought I was—who, Linda?" he said, the huskiness of his voice making it almost hoarse. She couldn't see his face very clearly, but she could sense a strangeness in his voice, a desperateness that frightened her.

She suddenly had the feeling that she was facing a stranger. Big and broad and very tall, Carter loomed above her, his hair white gold against the gloom beneath the trees. She was suddenly a little afraid of him, without knowing why.

"I—I thought you were Don," she said simply. "I—he was to be here, about this time."

"I saw your face in the moonlight as you came toward me with your arms out," Carter said slowly. "There was something I've often dreamed of seeing there—something I thought, for a moment, was meant for me. You love Don, Linda?"

She wondered then how she could have been so blind. Carter loved her! That kiss, full of tenderness, yearning, love, had told her that. And in that instant she knew that it was the sort of love she would never know with Don. Still—

She said softly, "I'm sorry, Carter. Yes, I love Don. I didn't know it until last night. It was then that he told me he loved me."

Carter said, "I love you, too, Linda. Guess I always have. I'm not much of a hand with women. I've tried before to tell you. But something always happened to stop me. And now—" He turned away, moved back into the trees. Linda stood where she was, confusion making chaos of her thoughts. Carter appeared again almost immediately, leading his horse. He said:

"Will you do me one favor, Linda?"

"Of course, Carter," she said eagerly. "Anything!"

Seeing the hurt in his lean face, hearing it in his voice, made her realize how fond of him she really was, how disturbing was the thought that she was causing him pain. He was too good, too kind, too gentle to suffer, she thought, with a sudden rush of emotion.

"Will you go back to the house," he was saying, "and wait for Don there? I'm riding on down into Sunrise Valley to investigate some smoke signs. I'll be sure to run into him on the trail, and I'll tell him you're waiting at the house for him."

Linda was puzzled. But she said: "Of course, Carter." Then, before she could say anything else, he had mounted the big bay and was moving off up the trail.

She wanted to ask him why he made such a funny request, but he was gone before she put it into words. A little depressed, and greatly disturbed, she turned back toward the house, walking slowly, her eyes on the ground.

HALF an hour later, Don arrived. Linda rose from the chair in the parlor, all the old excitement returning, sending a thrilling tremor through her at sight of his thin wiry figure, the dark tumbled hair above the restless black eyes and handsome face.

He walked across the room, stood beside her. It was then that she sensed something wrong. He looked angry. His dark eyes were rebellious, hard with anger. Instead of taking her immediately into his arms, telling her how much he had missed her, how much he loved her, he stared down into her eyes, said:

"What's that Forest Ranger always snooping around here for? What right has *he* on private property?"

Linda recoiled a little, stiffened, too, at the way in which he made an intruder of Carter.

"Carter comes here because he is a friend of mine," she said stiffly, pride rushing to hide her disappoint-

ment. "He was a friend of my Dad's. And since I've been alone here, he's sort of looked out for me. And the folks around here appreciate Carter's patrolling their land that borders on the Reserve. He doesn't *have* to do it."

"Then why does he?" Don snapped impatiently. "I've got my own men to watch for fires in the Valley. I don't need a Forest Reserve man to do it. Besides—" He broke off abruptly as he saw the hot flush in Linda's face, the revolt in her eyes. He thrust out quick, eager hands, clasped her by the shoulders, drew her to him.

"Sorry I lost my temper, sweet," he said, smiling suddenly, the anger going out of his face. "But that stock I got in the valley is valuable—and it's all I've got. Guess I've grown to be like a settin' hen with a brood of chickens."

He kissed her. It was the same as it had been last night, and she had the same frightened little feeling. Then the fear went away and the feverish thrill replaced it, left her trembling.

But even as she returned his kiss, she found herself comparing it with Carter's.

After a while Don said: "Will you marry me, sweet, right away? We can take a trip to El Paso for a honeymoon. I'll show you a little of the world, darling, that you don't know exists."

"Yes," she said happily. "I could be ready by next month."

"Next month!" he said sharply. "I mean the end of the week. I've got to go to town tomorrow morning early, on business. I'll be there a couple of days, seeing people, making arrangements. I want you to ride in and meet me there on Saturday. That's three days off. Be ready then to take the trip."

"But, Don!" Linda protested. "I'd have to get some clothes made for such a trip! It would take time!"

"We'll buy clothes in El Paso," he said impatiently. "And we can be married by the parson in town. Not afraid to come with me, are you, sweet?" He drew her close.

"No," she said. "No, I'm not afraid."

When he left at midnight, she had promised to meet him in town on Saturday.

NEXT morning there was trouble that took her thoughts away from plans for her wedding. She found her foreman waiting for her when she went downstairs to breakfast.

"We found some dead stock among that bunch we got grazin' over in the pasture this side of Sunrise Valley this mornin'," Shorty Edwards reported. "And about a dozen more head that's actin' mighty funny. I can't figure what's wrong with 'em. I sent Old Doc over to the west range early this week, and he's about the only hombre hereabouts that knows more about sick cattle than I do. So I'm sending one of the boys to bring Doc back, to see if we can save them that's already taken sick and find out what's got into them."

"Carter Grant might be able help," Linda said. "He's as good a vet as Old Doc, Dad always said."

Shorty nodded. "Sent over for Carter first thing. But his cabin is closed up, and it looks as if he's gone for a spell."

Linda had a little sinking feeling at this news. If Carter had left on one of his patrols, he wouldn't be back for a week, maybe. And she wouldn't get to see him before she left with Don on Saturday.

She was surprised that seeing Carter before she married Don meant so much to her. Getting married like this, without preparation, without the ones she loved about her to witness it, made it seem, somehow, a clandestine thing. And it didn't seem right, somehow, not to tell Carter first.

Old Doc showed up late in the afternoon, rode over to the pasture where the sick cattle were, along with Linda and Shorty. It didn't take much more than a look for the veteran cowboy to make a diagnosis. Old Doc had wrangled cattle from the lower Rio Grande valley up to the Canadian border, and there wasn't much he didn't know about them.

He looked grim as he turned to Linda, took off his battered Stetson and wiped a leathery, wrinkled face.

"Looks like they been eatin' loco weeds," he said. "Didn't know there was any of it up here in this part of the country, but don't know of anything else that makes cattle go crazy like that, then drink themselves to death."

"What *is* loco weed?" Linda asked, puzzled.

"Well, down around the Border it's known as marihuana. Comes from over in Mexico. A weed that grows wild, mostly. But the Mexes cultivate it sometimes, and smoke it. Makes 'em as crazy as it does cattle, when they eat it. Over here in the States, they look out for it, kill it off whenever they find it growing. And the Rangers keep a lookout for Mexes who try to smuggle the dried weed over the Border and sell it for dope."

"I'll set the boys to rootin' the weed out first thing in the morning," Shorty said, after Doc had described the weed, but he was unable to find any of it in the pasture where they now were.

"Most likely they found it growin' up some of these gulleys in the hills," he said.

BY THE time they got back to the house it was dark. The boys made for the bunkhouse and supper. Linda was sitting on the front porch, staring into the fading reflection of day against the western sky, when the calm and peace and quiet of dusk was shattered by a rifle-shot.

It wasn't until the quiet had been blasted by three more shots from a revolver that she believed the first one. Her thoughts snapped back to that other shot that Carter had gone to investigate. One rifle-shot could mean a deer hunter, she thought, but three revolver shots, quickly following it, couldn't mean game hunting.

Linda

She ran for the corral, reached it along with Shorty and some of the other boys. Shots from a gun around here were so rare that their startled expressions were, she thought anxiously, justified.

"They came from Sunrise Valley trail," Shorty said. "Reckon we better go investigate."

"I'm going too," Linda said. "Don Gilbey is in town, and we can't let anything happen to his prize breed stock."

Before they were halfway up the valley trail, they saw the smoke. Great black gobs of it began to rise up from behind the hill that separated them from the valley.

"That's too much smoke for a campfire," Shorty said.

"We've got to get Don's cattle out of there, then!" Linda cried. "Hurry, Shorty! Get all the boys!"

She rode on alone, while Shorty ran for help. She thought of Carter and wondered where he could be. His constant vigil in the wooded, hilly country surrounding the many valleys had long prevented forest fires.

But the gunfire—what could that mean?

She came upon them abruptly as she reached the top of the hill and

started down the trail into the valley. There were three dead men on the ground. They were all Mexicans. Don's Mexican cow-hands—those he had brought with him from El Paso, along with the cattle. Linda had never before seen them, nor had she seen the cattle, but Don had told her all about both.

She glanced quickly around the little group of men who had obviously been in the act of saddling the half-dozen or so lean, wiry Mexican broncs that were standing behind them.

She saw Don before he saw her. She was shocked to a standstill. What was he doing here? He had said he would be in town!

"You put them bundles on those broncs and ride," he was saying to the sullen-looking Mexicans, "or you'll get what those three cowards just got. Running out on me to save your own greasy hides, were you? Well, not if *I* know it!"

THE men began to move slowly. They moved over to what was obviously their bunkhouse. Linda watched, unseen, not knowing why she didn't move forward, yet held to the trail as if by a magnet. She was about to call out to Don, but one of the sullen-looking men turned and spoke to him, and Linda realized that he, at least, was not a Mexican, although his face, even in the gloom, looked as dark as the rest.

"Ain't no sense in hangin' the murder of a Forest Reserve man on your neck, Don," he said. "And it's murder if you let him stay in there." He jerked his head toward the billowing waves of smoke.

Linda's heart leaped, and fear became a hard lump in her throat. Bewildered, she tried to figure out what was happening. Don was here with his men. And instead of being down there fighting the fire that must be endangering his prize cattle, he and his men were saddling up their horses, obviously preparing to leave the scene.

Don was saying, "He stays there! He set the fire, and by hell he's gonna eat it, damn his snooping soul to hell! And if you wooden-headed coyotes had any sense you'd know that, when that fire gets through with Grant, there won't be nothing left to prove he was tied up down there. There won't be no proof of murder. And there ain't a soul knows anything about what's in that Valley—but Grant."

Linda seemed paralyzed by the rasping, venomous voice. He looked like Don—but this voice—that look on his thin face. . . .

She came out of her shocked paralysis abruptly. Carter! They were talking about Carter Grant! And Don was standing here admitting that Carter was down there in that fire, burning to death!

THE primitive emotion that gripped her was a fierce, fighting instinct that she had never felt before, but which she did not question. Without thinking further than that one thing—that Carter Grant was in danger—she plunged her horse down that trail.

Don and his men didn't hear her until she was almost upon them. With the roar of the fire, the wind was blowing from the valley, and they had been too intent upon their own little drama. She pulled the big horse to a rearing halt in the middle of the group of startled men.

"Linda!" Don cried, springing to the head of her horse, grasping the bridle. "What—"

The Mexicans began to run for their ponies. Don turned from her, his hand leaping for the gun at his holster. He pulled the trigger even as it came up, and the roar caused Linda's horse to rear.

When the smoke cleared away, she

saw that another of the men lay on the ground, crying out in fear, as he clutched at a wounded shoulder.

"Any more of you try runnin' and you get the same!" Don roared. "Get to loading those bales and—"

Linda's booted foot lashed out suddenly, hit the gun in Don's hand. Even as he clutched at his wrist and cried out with startled pain, she was out of the saddle, swooping upon the fallen weapon.

Her actions now were purely instinctive. Something was rising out of the chaos of her emotions, but she wasn't trying to explain it. There wasn't time for that now. Carter was in danger of burning to death!

She came to a standing position with the gun leveled on Don. For one startled instant the men in that little clearing stared at her. Then the Mexicans began to move. They leaped into the saddles, some of them hastily tightening cinches, finishing their saddling in a second. They were ignoring Don now.

"What the hell is the meaning of this, Linda?" Don blustered, starting cautiously toward her, his eyes shifting from the gun in her steady hand to her eyes, wide and dark with fierce anger.

"Where's Carter?" she said abruptly.

He kept coming toward her. "I don't know what you mean," he said slowly. "Why should *I* know where—"

"Stop where you are or I'll shoot you!" she said, and in that instant she forgot that he had ever kissed her, ever held her in his arms. He was a stranger now, a menacing intruder into range country that had been an Eden of peace. "I heard what you said about Carter being in there—where *is* he?"

He laughed suddenly, put his hands on his hips and sneered down at her.

"Why aren't you down there?" She nodded to the burning valley, keeping her eyes on him. "What about your cattle? Is Carter—"

He leaped for the gun. Linda fired.

It happened fast. No more than a breath later, Don Gilbey was sinking to the ground, his right leg crumpling under him.

A high shrill cry of pain, of anger and fear came from his lips. Then he began to curse Linda, to curse the men who were deserting him, running away, leaving him there, wounded.

But there was no pity in Linda's heart and she turned back to her horse, mounted. Don began crawling frantically toward her.

"You can't leave me here, Linda!" he cried. "The fire—it's coming this way! I can't get away, with my leg—"

SHE stopped abruptly, stared down at him with cold, hard eyes. Shorty and the boys would be along soon, but so far, there was no sound of their approach. If she could bluff Don Gilbey—

"Why can't I?" she said coldly. "Your men have run out on you. Mine are all over on the west range, and even if they see this smoke and decide to come home, it'll take them several hours. I'm going to try and find Carter. You're willing that he should die in there, so *I'm* willing that you get the same treatment—"

"I'll tell you where he is!" Don cried wildly. "Help me up to the top of the hill, Linda, and I'll tell you where he is!"

Linda's frantic dark eyes were on the creeping fire in the valley below. It was, she saw, running along the gulleys between the short hills down there, among the tall grass—

"Talk fast!" she said, slipping to the ground and standing beside him. And not until he had told her where Carter was did she help him to a sitting position against a rock.

"Help me now—help me up the trail!" he pleaded.

His fear filled her with disgust and she turned away.

"If you've told me the truth," she said, going to her horse and mounting swiftly, "I'll be back here in time to help you to the other side of the hill, before the fire reaches here. If you *haven't* told me the truth, then I won't be back—and you'll get what's coming to you."

She rode down into the smoke in the valley, Don's panicky voice calling after her, assuring her that he had told her the truth. She didn't believe him actually until then; but she knew that his cowardly soul would have made him call her back if he hadn't told her the truth the first time.

She rode with the wind, pleading with the frightened horse, coaxing her down as far as she would go. But when the flaming brush and trees began to leap up around them, the horse went wild. Linda dismounted then and turned the pony around, let her run back up the hill.

She ran then, stumbling, her eyes burning with the heat and the smoke.

Carter trapped—the fire creeping up on him! She had to reach him in time! He couldn't die! Not now, before she could tell him that she had made a terrible mistake, that if she meant happiness to him, that was her happiness, too.

He must have seen her a long time before she heard his voice. It was hoarse when she finally heard it, warning her away, shouting to her to turn back.

It seemed hours before she saw him. Then she was bending over him, crying real tears, along with the smarting her eyes were doing because of the smoke, as she tried to unfasten the cruel wolf trap that Don Gilbey had deliberately fastened about his hand, to hold him there until the fire could reach him.

And all the time, Carter was berating her, calling her a fool, an idiot—everything he could think of—without meaning a word of it. His voice trembled with tenderness, his eyes adored her. Linda understood.

Between sobs she said:

"I love you. I've been a silly fool. So dumb not to have known it long ago! Dumber, to have been fooled by Don Gilbey for even a moment!"

Then he was free, his swollen, mangled hand thrust into his shirt. With his good hand he caught hers, began to run, just as the flames raced around the rocks at the end of the gulley in which he had been imprisoned. The valley was webbed with trenches of fire, as the flames raced up one gulley and down the next, slowly covering the whole sweep of range.

"The cattle!" Linda gasped suddenly. "The cattle Don has in here—we can't leave them!"

But Carter didn't stop, didn't even slow up.

"There never were any breed cattle in here," he said pantingly. "That was just one of his lies. He's been growing marihuana in here. That's why those Mexicans were on guard—to keep anyone from coming into the valley. He rented it from you to grow the weed he's been shipping East to be peddled in doped cigarettes."

THE flames were licking at their heels long before they reached the spot where she had left Don. Both of them knew they couldn't make it, long before Carter stopped suddenly, swept her into his arms. She could hardly see his swollen, battered face because of her smoke-filled eyes as she clung to him, lifted her dry, parched lips to his.

With hell all about them, and not even a gambling chance of escaping it, their lips met in a kiss that blotted out the fear of death, swept away everything except the knowledge that this moment was worth dying for, even—

Carter swept his smudged hat from his head suddenly, beating at the flame that began to lick out at Linda's booted feet. In the same instant a faint cry reached them—somebody calling Linda's name.

They both answered, unable now to tell in which direction the trail lay, because of the smoke towering all about them.

"It's Shorty and the boys," Linda managed to whisper through dry lips. "If we could just yell loud enough for them to locate us, lead us out of here—"

It was like ripping the skin out of their parched throats, those cries. And to them, in the roar about them, it seemed hardly possible that their voices would carry far enough. They were afraid that, if they moved, they might go in the wrong direction, away from the men. So they waited.

Only a miracle could save them from death. But they were calm, because they were together.

They heard the beating of wet gunny-sacks against the ground suddenly and began to stumble through the smoke and flaming earth toward the sound. What seemed like years later they saw figures. Then Shorty's smoke-blackened, homely face. . . .

MUCH later they sat in the cool night air on the porch of the ranch house. They were battered and burned red, but they were happy. They were together. Carter said:

"I'm sending some of your men down to El Paso with Don, to turn him over to the Rangers down there. They're looking for him; I wired a description of him to Ranger headquarters this morning. He's wanted for smuggling marihuana across the Border down there. He escaped from jail there while serving a sentence for it."

Linda said, "He said you set fire to the valley, Carter. Why?"

"Because the valley belongs to you and there wasn't any written agreement between you and Don Gilbey saying that you had rented the valley to him. Therefore, if I'd brought in government agents to find that weed growing in there, Don might have been able to wriggle out of the charge—and pass it on to you. Last night when I met him on his way to see you, I told him that I'd discovered the weed in the valley, despite his Mex guards. I told him that I knew you loved him and that, if he would set fire to the weed, burn it out and go straight with you from now on, I'd forget about having seen it."

Linda said breathlessly:

"You did it because you thought—I loved him?"

Carter nodded, tried to grin, and failed miserably, with his stiff, burned face.

"I told him I'd give him until today to burn it out. If he didn't, I said, I'd do it myself. Well, he tried, instead, to get the stuff cut and hauled out on his Mexican helpers' horses. He had started work on that when I showed up—but I managed to get the fire going good before he caught me."

"His men didn't mind smuggling marihuana, apparently," Linda said. "But when they found out he meant to leave you, a Forest Ranger, to die in there—well, the murder of a government employee was evidently so serious a matter that it scared Don's Mexicans into deserting him."

Carter nodded, drew her close to his side.

"That money I told you I'd saved, darling," he said. "It would go a long way toward bringing in some new breed stock to strengthen the Sunrise Valley strain. And I wouldn't feel so reluctant to marry the owner of a ranch, if I could invest a few thousand dollars in it."

"Just try and use an excuse like that to get out of marrying me!" Linda said. "Just try, Carter darling!"

Rimrock Courage

BY
Al Martin

Sure that she could not be seen from the ranch, she drove her spurs deep. She'd warn Lee . . .

ATOP the jagged rimrock above Sleeping Squaw Canyon, June Deering checked her loping pony with a little cry of surprise, anger glowing in her deep blue eyes. Groups of scrawny cattle clustered about the waterholes shimmering below her, their shaggy bodies gleaming red in the morning sunlight. The girl's lips tightened, her hands clenched.

So those nesters thought they could steal Double Hammer water and get away with it! She whirled her horse, spurred down the winding trail to a narrow opening in the jagged cliffs, hot anger riding her.

It was time those land grabbers learned they could have all the trouble they wanted. This bold theft of water was a challenge to the Double Hammer ranch that could be answered in only one way. Her eyes smoldered

and her hand dropped to the ivory-butted six-gun at her hip. She was sick of hearing about the nesters and what they'd do to the rich grasslands of the Broken Hills. If they thought they could run over her, just because she was a girl—

"Stop where you are!" The command snapped out of a tangle of greasewood and sage on the steep slope straight ahead.

June jerked to a halt, her eyes lifting to the rocky wall at the left side of the narrow pass. A lanky, gray-bearded man reared up behind a granite boulder, his long rifle shooting off steel gleams of light.

"What do you want?" June's voice was cool, but she tensed for action.

"Don't try nothing, Miss," came the sharp warning. "My pardner's covering you. We don't want trouble."

"What *do* you want?"

"You're Brad Deering's daughter and the boss of the Double Hammer layout, ain't you? Kinda figured thataway," as the girl nodded. "Miss Deering, we're not looking for trouble. We're wanting to be peaceful with your outfit."

"You certainly act like it," she retorted. "Crowding our land and stealing our water—and holding a gun on me! You sure act like you want to be peaceful!"

"Miss Deering, we just had to use that water. Our cows are dying of thirst." He was walking slowly toward her, his mild brown eyes clouded with anxiety. "We don't want to crowd you, but we can't help ourselves. We've gotta live, ma'am. Reckon some cowmen figure a nester's got no right in this world, but we're human beings, miss."

"That doesn't give you any right to steal Double Hammer land and water."

"Our waterholes have gone dry, ma'am. We've gotta have water. We've got women and children, Miss Deering, and we can't stand around and see them go hungry and thirsty. All we ask, ma'am, is that we can use that water in Sleeping Squaw Canyon till she rains a mite."

THERE was something appealing about this mild-eyed, kind-faced old man, something that touched the girl's heart. His weathered face was lined with care, his faded overalls neatly patched. Perhaps he had a wife, children to look out for. June's eyes softened as she looked at him. The Double Hammer ranch had plenty of water for—

She straightened in the saddle with a little gesture of impatience, the soft glow dying from her eyes. This was her ranch, the ranch placed in her charge by her gruff, rheumatism-crippled father. His great voice, booming hate of all nesters, was in her ears, the voice that had dominated her from earliest childhood. She had to be hard. Those nesters had to be driven from the Broken Hills or they would crowd out the cattlemen.

"You people aren't wanted here," she said crisply. "You knew you were heading straight into trouble when you came. I'll clean out every nester I find at my waterholes—"

"Says you!" snarled a voice, and a short, bulky man pushed out from behind a rabbit-eared rock and strode close. "Now you listen to me, young woman. We're here and we're staying, get that? We're not going to be run out by no land-hawgs—"

"I wouldn't talk thataway, Buck," protested the gray-bearded nester, "not to a girl. We'll never get nowhere—"

"When a woman puts herself in a man's place, I'm talking to her like I'd talk to a man," the other snarled. "If it's trouble she's after, she sure can have it. Any time anybody, man or woman, figures they can trample Buck Stroud, they're sure barking down the wrong hole." He scowled up at June.

She met his savage glare with a

steady glance, coldly measuring the hard, black, close-set eyes, the slash of a bitter mouth, the massive body and hairy wrists of him, and the black guns tied down at his hips. Here was no common nester, but an unscrupulous gunman, a killer.

"This is my ranch," she said curtly, "and you're trespassing on my land. I'd advise you to get out."

"Yeah?" His swarthy face wrinkled in a sneer. "Now you look a-here. Them nesters have as much right to this range as you ranchers—they've only taken up Gov'ment land that you cowmen have been using like you're Gawd Awmighty. We folks have got just as much right to live as you, get that? And we're not aiming to starve. We've grabbed these waterholes and we're sure holding 'em. You try to run them steers outa that canyon, and—"

"That's just what I'm going to do," June cut in, angry color sweeping her tanned face. "And don't hang around this range, mister, if you know what's good for you. We run out coyotes that don't belong to this country."

"Yeah?" He stepped closer, his face black with fury. "Think you're Gawd Awmighty round here, don't you? Think you and that old wolf of a father of yours own the earth! No damn she-cat can howl in Buck Stroud's face and get away—"

Like the dart of a snake, June's quirt struck at his face. Stroud went back with a choking cry as the lash stung him, instinctively throwing up his hands.

June's hand flashed to her hip. Her six-gun glinted.

"Unbuckle your belts and drop those guns, coyote! Quick!" Her voice was calm, but held a deadly ring.

A MOMENT Stroud wavered, hands hovering near his black weapons. Then, cowed despite himself by the fire blazing in the girl's eyes, he carefully unfastened his cartridge belts and eased the guns to the ground, growling under his breath.

"Now get out of here."

He stared up at her, his eyes black pools of hate. "You'll be sorry for this," he gritted. With an oath he turned and charged awkwardly down the pass.

The lanky, gray-bearded nester was staring straight at the girl, on his lips a strange smile. He had made no move to protect Stroud.

"You're—great," he said softly. "No wonder you're running an outfit like the Double Hammer! Miss Deering, I'm sorry this had to happen. Buck Stroud's bad—he's poison. Look out for him. And don't go inside that canyon. The nesters are desperate. They won't run."

Her lips parted in a half-smile. "I'm sorry we can't be friends. If all nesters were like you, perhaps there wouldn't be so much trouble. But tell your friends the Double Hammer will clean out every nester we find at our waterholes."

She turned her horse and rode out of the pass. Her heart warmed to that kindly old man, and to the helpless women and children of the nesters. It wasn't their fault that their men were shiftless land-grabbers, trying to steal the land and water of stronger and more able men. If only there was some way to aid the women and little ones! And that dear old fellow—

"Why, June, you weak little fool!" she scolded, and clipped the pony with impatient heels.

This was her range, and when others tried to take her land or water, she must fight. To strike back savagely each time an enemy struck—that was the stern, uncompromising law of the range. Resolve crept into her eyes, and her lips tightened. There could be no thought of peace with creatures like Buck Stroud; her lip curled disdainfully with the thought of him. She would lead the

Double Hammer cowboys to Sleeping Squaw Canyon and—

A RIDER shot out from a canyon and raced toward her, his powerful buckskin fairly skimming the desert floor. Her heartbeat quickened, and she pulled her pony to a walk. All trace of anger left her eyes, and she smiled warm welcome.

She was aware of the glow in his hazel eyes, the play of sunlight on his blond hair, the splendid ruggedness of him as the rider, coming near, swept off his sombrero. What if her father had roared his disapproval of Lee Hammond and forbidden her to meet him? Lee was a man, a man any woman could be proud to know.

"Saw you riding from Hashknife Pass, and wasn't going to pass up a chance like this," he greeted her, with a flashing smile. "Gosh, honey, if you were any sweeter, the bumblebees would get you!"

Under the cloud of curling chestnut hair, warm color flooded the girl's cheeks. "You ought to be looking after the Triangle, Mr. Hammond," she countered with pretended severity, "instead of wasting time here. First thing you know, Lee, the nesters'll get you!"

"It's not wasting time to be with the grandest girl in Nevada," he grinned. "You're getting prettier every day, June. Talk about flowers!"

"I'm riding, if you don't hush," she threatened, resisting the impulse to rumple his blond hair. "I mean it. Oh, Lee, I've got to hurry, the nesters are stealing our Sleeping Squaw water!"

Lee's face became instantly grave. "I was afraid they would, June; they're desperate. Their waterholes have gone dry, and they're ready for—"

"I don't care what's happened, they're *not* going to use Double Hammer water." Her clear voice hardened. "I'm going to clean out every—"

"But they'll fight, June! Honey, don't go to Sleeping Squaw Canyon. You're not a man, and it's not right for your father to act like you were."

"I'm as fast with a six-gun as any man on the range," she countered, "and I'm in charge of this ranch. I'll never let a bunch of nesters run the Double Hammer." Her head lifted. "I've warned them to get out, and I'm taking a bunch of our riders down there."

The concern in Lee's face deepened and he leaned forward, hands gripping the saddlehorn. "June, those nesters have got to have water—they'll die without it. I don't like nesters any more than you do, but they're human. I'm letting 'em use some of my Lonesome Creek water—"

"You're *what?*"

He nodded. "All the cowmen but your dad and the TS have agreed to help out the nesters until it rains."

"You're joining those shiftless land-grabbers against the *cowmen?*" She was staring at him in amazement, hands clenched, eyes flaming dangerously.

War Sparks

LEE shrugged wide shoulders. "Those people are here, June, and they won't leave. Probably can't, even if they want to. They figure they've as much right to be in the Broken Hills as cowmen have. They're here with their women and kids. And they'll starve without water. They're desperate, June."

"And you've joined them?"

"I'm helping 'em. So are the other ranchers. Tell your dad he can't starve a bunch of folks just because he hates nesters—"

"You—you traitor!" she blazed, and whirling her pony, spurred savagely down the rim road skirting the flank of a hill, blended anger and hurt driving her.

That Lee Hammond, of all men in

the world, the man she loved, had turned against her and hers for the sake of a lot of worthless nesters!

Her breath caught in her throat. Love had broken the granite shell in which her father had cast her young life, broken it as sunlight shreds mist. And now Lee had turned against her.

Then came swift anger. She would show Lee Hammond and those other ranchers something. Cowmen! Her lips curled in contempt. She would gather her fighting cowboys, even now aching to use their guns, and sweep those nesters from the waterholes as the fierce wind sweeps dust. She was the fighting daughter of hard old Brad Deering.

The pony shied from the glint of a cartridge lying in the trail dust and danced dangerously close to the edge of the narrow way. June jerked him back, finding relief in riding madly.

June Deering's life had been cast in the hard ways of the range. Her father had raised her to take the place of the son he had always wanted and never had, trained her for the day when she would own the Double Hammer outfit. She had been taught deadly skill with the six-gun and the hard mastery of fighting horses and fighting men. She could rope a steer or brand a calf.

Ruthless, hard as granite, Brad Deering had come to the Broken Hills when the West was young, and with an iron hand and blazing guns had made a sure place for himself. The powerful Double Hammer ranch was the monument to his strength and ruthlessness, and he was determined that his daughter should hold all he had gained. So he had trained her to be hard as himself. He dominated her wishes, her own ideas, by his grim, hard personality.

But there was a hint of wistful weariness in June's deep blue eyes as she rode slowly toward the Double Hammer ranch house. Steel herself as she would against the nesters, she could not forget that mild-eyed old man in Hashknife Pass nor thrust from her mind the thought of women and children parched with thirst, suffering. It wasn't their fault that they were here in the Broken Hills; they couldn't help it that the waterholes had gone dry; that the rain for which they prayed would not come.

Double Hammer land and water must be guarded from those who would take it, but if some agreement could be made with the nesters—if only her father wasn't so hard! Lee had said that only the Double Hammer and TS outfits had refused water to the nesters. . . .

She visioned guns blazing, men and horses sinking down in choking gunsmoke, wounded cattle bawling piteously, as Double Hammer riders stormed into Sleeping Squaw Canyon —and horror clutched her. Nesters would die, leaving helpless wives, sisters, mothers, daughters—and wailing little ones. Others would die too —gay, laughing, reckless cowboys who were like brothers to her.

Her face blanched slowly, and a shiver of foreboding chilled her. The bright sun had suddenly lost its warmth, and everything seemed cold and threatening, like the grim, dark shadows cast by the ragged hills.

"I can't stop it," she whispered breathlessly. "Dad will fight to save that water, and the nesters will fight to get it. I can't do a thing. I can't!"

The shuffle of the years was changing the Broken Hills, and all but Brad Deering and old Terry Shane, grizzled owner of the TS spread, were yielding to that inexorable change. Slowly but surely the range was changing to farms. Like the resistless march of destiny, nesters were gradually taking the land cattlemen had considered their own. And in this land of little rain, water was as precious as life itself.

She straightened her shoulders resolutely, and her lips set in a de-

termined line. She had to fight—the nesters were forcing it on her. This trouble with them was not the seeking of the Double Hammer. Her father must have refused them the water—and they had seized it. They must be driven from the canyon.

BRAD DEERING'S great voice sounded from the big ranch house as June rode up to the corral. A powerful black horse stood in the shade of the huge cottonwood fronting the house. That meant Reed Gregory, her father's lawyer.

June was conscious of irritation as she swung down from her saddle and turned the pony into the corral. She instinctively disliked Reed Gregory; the fat bulk of him, his soft, plump hands and flabby face, his ever ready laugh. He was Brad Deering's closest friend, and a political power in Hackamore and the affairs of Fremont County.

Walking briskly toward the house, June paused, glancing at the idling riders near the long bunkhouse—a strange sight on the iron-ruled Double Hammer. They had been gathered for trouble, these reckless-eyed, firm-mouthed cowboys; they were ready for trouble, itching to use the guns pouched at their hips, burning to carry the stern law of cattle country to men they regarded with withering contempt.

Foreboding again chilled the girl. Some of these laughing riders, hardly more than boys, would never come back from a raid on the desperate nesters. It was a terrible thing that men so young must die because of a little water. . . .

She went into her father's office.

Brad Deering was limping up and down the small room, his weathered face crimson with rage, his gray eyes smoky with the anger burning him. A big man, with a thatch of bristling grayish hair, he fairly exuded power and arrogance.

"It's time you got here," he snapped as he saw the girl, his great voice snuffing out the greeting of the huge, fat man seated by the scarred desk. "There's hell to pay. Reed is just telling me a bunch of those yeller coyotes calling themselves cowmen have throwed in with the nesters!"

"The information reached me last night, June, from an authoritative source," Reed Gregory added suavely.

"They're sharing their water with nesters!" Deering roared. "Helping those no-account land-grabbers! Cowmen! Throwing in with nesters, agin me and Terry Shane!"

"It complicates an already serious situation," Gregory observed.

"Well?" Deering roared, as the girl remained silent. "What you going to do? You're running this ranch, ain't you?"

JUNE shrugged. "It's their own water, Dad. There isn't anything we can do about it."

"The hell there's not!" Deering's sorrel mustache bristled with wrath. "There's no place in the Broken Hills for cowmen who run with nesters. I'll run 'em all out, nesters and coyotes, too. I'll teach them to—that young whelp of a Lee Hammond is mixed up with them. Do you hear? If ever I hear of you meeting that fellow again, I'll—"

"Don't say it, Dad!" June's clear, cool voice cut through her father's roar, her blue eyes locking with his like the crossing of flashing swords.

"The situation is ominous, June," Reed Gregory's deep voice shattered the tense silence. "The nesters have gradually taken over the best of the open range—"

"The small ranchers have never been friendly with the nesters, Mr. Gregory," June cut in coolly, sweeping the lawyer with the measuring glance she had learned so well from her father. "Why are they helping those land-grabbers now?"

Reed Gregory spread out soft hands. "It would seem that they are trying to precipitate trouble between the nesters and your Double Hammer and the TS ranches, June, probably with the idea of strengthening their own position. The nesters are desperately in need of water—we'll admit that. They're ready to fight for it. By pretending to help them, by temporarily allowing them access to their water, the small ranchers avert trouble with the nesters, and at the same time center all their hate against the Double Hammer and TS."

"That's it!" Deering choked. "That's their dirty game! Scheming to duck out of helping us run the land-grabbin' weasels out of the country, the coyotes! Figuring on saving their own hides, while the big outfits and the nesters are whittling each other down!"

"The nesters have become so bold that they are even threatening to take your Sleeping Squaw waterholes," continued the lawyer.

"What?" Deering roared.

Gregory nodded. "They'll probably do it, Brad, unless—"

"June, get a dozen of the boys and ride to Sleeping Squaw Canyon. Clean out every nester you find!" Deering crashed a huge fist down on the desk. "I'll show 'em! If it wasn't for this damn rheumatism, I'd lead 'em myself! Steal my water, will they? I'll show 'em! Well, what you waiting for?" he snapped.

JUNE'S thoughts were racing. The nesters had already seized the waterholes. She had intended to tell her father all about it, but something had kept her lips sealed.

Range warfare would flame the moment she led her fighting riders to Sleeping Squaw Canyon. The mere thought of it chilled her heart. And she could not stop the war. The nesters would fight for survival, and her father would never yield an inch.

"Wouldn't it be better, Brad, if you waited for night?" Reed Gregory's voice came to her as from far away. "I hardly think the nesters will try anything yet, but if they do, they won't be expecting a night attack. They'll run like a bunch of sheep from a timber wolf, Brad. Nesters aren't fighters—they're not like cowboys."

The girl was conscious of a surge of relief. It was possible the nesters would drive their cattle from the water-holes before darkness, guarding against the very attack Gregory suggested. In that case, there would be no crashing gun-thunder when the Double Hammer riders struck Sleeping Squaw Canyon.

"Maybe you're right, Reed, maybe you're right," old Brad rumbled, dropping heavily into a chair. "Me, I wasn't ever strong on waiting, but maybe—"

"And leading a raid is hardly a job for a girl," Gregory continued softly, "even for such a fighter as Miss—"

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, Mr. Gregory," June cut in. "I'm not asking any man to do my fighting."

Wheeling, she strode out into the bright sunshine, glad of any pretext to get away, feeling an angry impatience with her father that was almost more than she could mask. Why couldn't he be more reasonable? And why was Gregory deliberately fanning his rage against the small ranchers? The lawyer *must* know that Lee and his friends aided the nesters only because they were prompted by humanity.

She was near the south corral when she spied a horseman spurring furiously toward the ranch house. Swept by sudden alarm, she stepped out, waving her big hat frantically. The cowboy swung his pony and raced across to her.

"Miss June," he cried as he jerked the horse to a plunging halt, "those

nesters have grabbed Sleeping Squaw Canyon. And Lee Hammond and a couple other cowmen are with 'em!"

Consternation gripped her, but she mastered the surge of sick terror. Her father must not know.

"All right, Ted." Her voice was cool. "Go back and watch them. I'll get some of the boys and ride down."

Her hands were cold and damp as the cowboy raced away. Lee, the man she loved more than life, was with the nesters. Her own bullet might strike him down, when she led the charge of her riders on the water holes!

Gregory's Plot

REED GREGORY settled his flabby weight more comfortably in the groaning swivel-chair, his grin broadening. "They won't reach the canyon until after midnight, Buck, so you'll have plenty of time to post your men and welcome them. Old Brad at first was roaring for immediate action, but I convinced the old fool it would be best to wait for night. You ought to jar them pretty badly before they realize what's happening. Deering doesn't know, yet, that the nesters have seized the water, so—"

"That girl knows," Buck Stroud cut in shortly.

"What?" Gregory straightened up, the grin going from his mouth. "June knows?"

Stroud nodded. "She spotted things this morning and came tearing down Hashknife Pass like she owned the earth. We stopped her, and old Zeke Parsons tried to soft-soap her into letting us have some water. She gets snorty as hell, and I tells her a few things."

"What time was that?"

"Middlin' early. Reckon before seven o'clock."

The lawyer's brows drew together in a puzzled frown, and his plump hands tightened on the arms of the chair.

"Then she knew the nesters had the water and never said a word!" he muttered to himself. "That's funny, damned funny! Could it have been because I was there? Can it be that she's suspicious of me? She can't have found out anything—I've been too careful—"

"Maybe they're not waiting for night," Stroud's voice jarred upon the lawyer's racing thoughts. "Maybe that old Deering wolf is just pretending—"

"He doesn't know a thing about it, I tell you," Gregory snapped. "I was with him when the girl came into his office, and she didn't say a word about the nesters taking that water. Deering was shouting what he'd do to the nesters and little cowmen. She rode off before I left the Double Hammer, and I'm positive she didn't say a thing about the waterholes—to old Brad or anyone else."

"Well, she was snorty as a wild bronc this morning," Stroud said, his eyes black with remembering how the girl had quirted and disarmed him. He tensed with memory of his shame, fervently hoping Gregory would never hear of it.

Brad Deering

"Said she'd clean out every nester she caught hanging around the waterholes, and she sure acted like she meant it. So she's not tellin' her old man! What you figger her game is?"

The lawyer shrugged impatiently. "I'll find out. She's up to something. June Deering isn't the sort to let a bunch of nesters run over her—she's

been trained too well by old Brad for that. She's either planning to handle things her own way, without letting the old man know what's up, or there's something. . . ."

He reached for a cigar, lit it slowly, his shrewd brain working like a well-oiled machine. The girl hadn't seemed particularly anxious to lead her riders into Sleeping Squaw Canyon when her father had barked the command. And yet she knew the nesters had already seized the waterholes. It wasn't because she feared a fight; June Deering was daring personified.

Then why hadn't she told her father the nesters were in Sleeping Squaw Canyon? Why hadn't she stormed into old Brad's office with the news and promptly led a bunch of her fighting cowboys against the nesters? That was June Deering's way. What had happened to change her?

GREGORY'S eyes narrowed in deeper thought. She didn't know that the small ranchers had agreed to help the nesters when she came into the office—or did she?

The girl had met Lee Hammond out on the open range, and he had told her. These two were young, attractive, vibrant with life. Then she was desperately striving to avert war with the nesters because the man she loved was with them. It flared in Gregory's mind like lightning slashing midnight skies, and instantly he moved to rout her plans.

"Buck, I'm going to send word to Deering that the nesters have seized his waterholes. That'll bring his men storming down on Sleeping Squaw Canyon, no matter what the girl is planning. So be ready. Hold the pass and hit them as hard as you can. . . . Is Hammond with the nesters?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

"He's in love with that girl."

"Yeah." Stroud's eyes narrowed, and his traplike mouth twisted mirthlessly. "Well, I'm not loving that hombre, not by a long shot. And let me tell you something, boss, I'm sure teaching that woman a thing or two afore I'm through with her."

"You lay off her," commanded the lawyer sharply, "and off Hammond, until I give the word. Understand? I'm playing those two *against* each other, using them to tighten my grip on the Double Hammer. Understand?"

Stroud shrugged. "All right," he grumbled. "It's just as you say, boss. But that heifer sure needs taming, and she's needing it bad."

"That'll come later. Meanwhile, she'll come in handy in the game we're playing. I've got those nesters and the Double Hammer ready to leap at each other's throats, and when it's all over, I'll have the Double Hammer in my pocket and you'll be it's foreman. We can't lose, Buck. Nobody on this range has any use for Brad Deering. He's always been a bully. And the nesters and the little ranchers are strong enough to wipe out his outfit."

"Providing we can keep 'em clawing each other."

"They will—after tonight." The grin again creased the lawyer's flabby jaws. "Deering will be like a mad bull when he knows the nesters have taken his waterholes, and he'll try to drive them all out of the country. Nothing will stop him. Don't let Hammond or those other cowmen know Deering's riders are coming until the shooting starts—the fools might try to dodge a fight."

"But that girl's the boss of the Double—"

"She won't be able to do a thing, not when old Brad learns he's lost his waterholes. I'll send word to him after sundown. Better drift now, Buck, and pass the word to your own men. Hold that pass, and don't say a word to nesters or cowmen until you sight the Double Hammer punch-

ers. And I don't want that girl hurt, understand? Tell your men to lay off her. She'll come in mighty handy if anything goes wrong."

THE grin deepened as he watched Stroud stride out of his office. June Deering was concealing from her father the seizure of the waterholes, because her lover was helping the nesters, was she? Gregory chuckled. He would hold that over June, use it as a whip against her. He rubbed his fat hands, his brown eyes gleaming with triumph.

"If Brad knew she was helping those nesters, he'd thrash her within an inch of her life," he chuckled. "And he'd kill Hammond. He hates nesters like he hates a rattlesnake, and he hates Lee Hammond. Sweet disposition that old wolf has, I don't think! It *must* be she's keeping her riders off those nesters because of Hammond—she hates them bad enough. But if old Brad ever finds out!" Again the grin.

He shifted his huge body to a more comfortable position in the creaking chair, replaced the cigar between his lips and drew a slow breath of smoke. He would have to watch that girl. If she persisted in her attempt to prevent open war between the Double Hammer outfit and the nesters, he would gently hint that it might be unpleasant for her if her father learned certain things. Yes, he had a whip now, and he'd use it.

He would soon have the Double Hammer ranch and dominate Fremont County. The range war he had so patiently, coldly, ruthlessly plotted was whirling into the Broken Hills. It would crush Brad Deering, ruin the nesters and whatever small ranchers survived its whirlwind of flaming death. And Reed Gregory would be unchallenged master of the Broken Hills country.

Long hungering for the Double Hammer's far-flung acres and sleek herds, Gregory had used his position as Deering's legal advisor and trusted friend to feed the old man's towering egotism, fan his hate of nesters, and incite him to make new enemies

Reed Gregory

and stand alone—so he could eventually be weakened and the more easily hurled from his place.

For the same reason, the lawyer had secretly encouraged settlement of more and more nesters on the open range. They would be useful dogs when the time came to drag down the old bear of the Double Hammer. And that time had struck. The third of a succession of dry years had driven the nesters to desperation, and brought Gregory the opportunity he craved.

From distant ranges, where his black guns had strewn human wreckage, Gregory had called Buck Stroud and four of his gun-slinging followers. Killing was their trade. They could be relied on to unleash the gun-lightning that would rock the Broken Hills and make Reed Gregory the uncrowned king of the rich rangeland.

He got up leisurely, waddled to a

window and looked out on Hackamore's dusty main street, broiling in the afternoon sun. He rolled the cigar between his lips, softly rubbed his hands.

Fighting Courage

WHERE the trail angled around Ten-Mile Rock to climb the steep grade leading into Mormon Canyon, June Deering slowed her racing pony to a walk, and the expression of calm determination left her. No need, here, for the mask of cool assurance she had been so well trained to wear. The Double Hammer was behind, and there were no hard eyes watching her.

She was alone with her trouble-ridden thoughts, alone with the cares weighing her down. Her young shoulders drooped, and a hunted look crept into her eyes. She had not told her father that the nesters had taken his waterholes. She had violated the rangeland's code of loyalty. And Lee was down there in Sleeping Squaw Canyon—with the traditional enemies of her own people.

The bay horse she was riding suddenly snuffled softly and stood with pointing ears. June looked up swiftly toward the top of the grade. Standing out against the skyline was a horse and rider, the man half-turned in the saddle, with one leg draped over the pommel, a cigarette between his lips. Lee Hammond.

The girl's heart leaped, then as he straightened in the saddle and urged his horse slowly down the slope, she tensed. She loved this man, but now he was leagued with her enemies. . . .

"Hi, June!" He gave her a flashing smile, and the flickering lights she loved shone in his hazel eyes. He seemed to have forgotten that only a little while ago they had parted in anger. "Is Brad home?"

She stared at him wide-eyed. "You're going to the Double Hammer?"

His grin widened. "Seems I can't help myself. The nesters are all primed to fight for your Sleeping Squaw water, June, and guns are sure going to blaze if the Double Hammer jumps 'em. We're trying to stop it, June—we don't want a range war, it would nigh ruin us all. So the small ranchers have named old Rusty Haynes and yours truly a committee of two to kind of talk things over with your dad. I'm waiting for Rusty now."

JUNE was trying to be coldly aloof with him, trying to treat him with withering disdain, but she had a crazy impulse to fling herself into his arms and ruffle his hair. She drew a deep breath.

"You'd better not go down there," she advised, striving to keep her voice level. "Dad'll probably shoot you. He's raving like a madman. Reed Gregory told him you were with the cowmen backing the nesters, and he's wild."

"So Reed Gregory spilled the glad tidings! You know, honey, I never did like that soft, fat buzzard." His eyes hardened. "Well, I can't see that it makes any difference. I'm on this committee, and I'm not turning my back on a job just—"

"Lee, *don't* go!"

"I've got to, June. Can't throw down my friends. Your old dad's not going to eat me, honey. Kind of figured he'd go straight up when he learned the nesters had grabbed his water."

"He doesn't know it!"

He started, stared at her in amazement. "You mean—"

"Oh, I don't know what to do!" she burst out. "It's awful! I mean, men being killed over a little water. I was going to tell Dad all about it, but— Those nesters have got to get out of that canyon, Lee. They've got to leave our waterholes. I'm sorry for their women and children, but I'm not

going to let any silly sentiment keep me from guarding my ranch. I won't —I won't, do you hear?"

He caught her hand, held it tight.

"I know, honey. This thing is mighty hard on you." He drew her close. "It's hard on us all, June girl. You're sorry for those poor devils of nesters. You'd let them have water, if it was only because of the women and kids, if you owned this ranch outright. Your dad has tried to make you hard and cold, but you're just a dear, sweet girl, torn between—"

"But I'll never let those nesters or anybody else run over the Double Hammer!" she flamed. "The nesters have always been our enemies. They've taken range we always used. They've crowded and crowded us, and every other rancher. Dad has a perfect right to refuse them the use of his waterholes."

"There's too many of them in the Broken Hills, June, we all know that. Seems like somebody is plumb interested in bringing 'em in. And some mighty mean hombres have come drifting in recent. But, honey, we don't want to have our people killing each other. We don't want a range war, with all the horror and sorrow."

She shivered. "Oh, Lee, it is awful. But I can't stop it. I wouldn't if I could—not while those nesters are after Double Hammer land and water. They're our enemies, I tell you!"

"But you'd let them have water to save them from starving," he said softly. "Until the rain comes."

She nodded. "Oh, if it would only rain! If—but it's no use talking about it, Lee. Dad will never compromise with nesters. He hates them, and he thinks this is a good time to run them out of the Broken Hills. There'll be old-time range war, and men, splendid men, will be—"

He bent his head swiftly, kissed her sweet, quivering mouth. She clung to him, stirred by an ecstasy greater than any fear."

"We're going to prevent a war, honey, we've got to. The nesters will pledge themselves to get out of that canyon—and we little ranchers'll see that they do it, too—the minute they've got enough water of their own. If your father will be a mite reasonable—"

"Lee! Somebody might see us!" She straightened, pushing him away, brushed back straying locks of her chestnut hair. "If Dad ever finds out we're meeting like this—! He's threatened to shoot you!"

JUNE turned away to hide the quick fear in her eyes, stared up at Table Mountain's ridges, crested with ragged old pines and clumps of juniper bushes. Oh, if only peace dwelt here! If there was no threat of crashing gun-thunder! But the very air was electric with menace.

"Clouds starting to float around," Lee commented, looking up at the sky of flawless sapphire. "Say, wouldn't it be great if a cloudburst hit the hills? There'd be water enough then for us all."

"Oh, if it only would!" she murmured. "Then we wouldn't have all this trouble. Lee, don't go to Dad, it will only make things worse. Let Rusty go alone. He's as friendly with Dad as anyone is around this range."

He shook his head. "I've got to do it, honey. We both promised we'd talk things over with him, and—"

"But he won't listen to you, I tell you! And I've got to tell him the nesters have taken our waterholes. I can't let our riders go into Sleeping Squaw Canyon without knowing what they're facing. I won't."

"We're telling your dad all about it, honey," he said quietly. "We're hoping that maybe when he knows—Here's Rusty now."

Rusty Haynes was short and stocky. The fierce desert suns of sixty summers had burned his seamed face brown as old leather, but the spirit

of youth danced in his keen old eyes.

"We're aiming to show that old bull of a father of yours that nobody's scheming to shove anything over on him," he grinned, after a jovial greeting. "Kinda show the old coot he shouldn't be staying out of the parade. Brad's not so bad, not when you get on his right side. You riding with us, girl?"

June shook her head. "He'd go wild if he saw me with Lee."

"Don't like the young varmint, huh?" Rusty chuckled. "Shucks, Lee's not so bad, not from his head up and feet down he ain't. Well, come along, you young maverick. If you're in for a licking, you might as well get it over with."

June reined aside to let them pass, and rode slowly after them. She had no hope that her father would permit the nesters to remain in peaceful possession of Sleeping Squaw Canyon. He hated the nesters with a passionate hatred, and rheumatism had aggravated his always savage temper.

OLD Brad's booming voice sounded as she neared the ranch yard. There was a low murmur of answering voices, then the air quivered with Deering's angry roaring. As the girl swung down from her pony there came an explosive shout that seemingly shook the house.

Booted feet hammered the hall floor, and Lee and Rusty strode out on the front porch, faces darkly flushed. A moment later Deering appeared in the doorway, graying hair and sorrel mustache bristling with rage.

"Cowmen!" he snorted, brandishing his heavy cane. "You call yourselves cowmen! Running with them two-bit nesters and calling yourselves cowmen? I'll run every damn one of you outa this country. Help 'em steal my waterholes, will you? You—"

"Hold your horses, you locoed old fool!" Rusty Haynes rasped, blue eyes gleaming wrathfully. "We're just trying to keep you from cutting off your damn fool head. You haven't got a lick of sense, Brad Deering, and never did have. Now you listen to me. Those nesters have gotta have water. You can't starve them and their women and children, just because you're—"

"Don't you tell me what I can't do!" Deering slammed his cane down savagely on the porch. "I'll break you all, every damn one of you, and I'll run—"

"You're not running anything," Haynes struck in. "We're helping those nesters because we've got to. We're trying to head off trouble afore she starts. Those men are desperate, and there are some mighty hard hombres with 'em. You try and shove them outa that canyon, Brad Deering, and you'll figure you've kicked in hell's front doors!"

"Don't you talk thataway to me, Rusty Haynes!" Deering raised huge fists to heaven, like an ancient prophet invoking the wrath of the gods against his foes. "I'll clean out every thieving nester I catch on the Double Hammer, and I'll clean out every coward calling himself a cowman—"

"Dad!" June's clear voice cut across her father's bellowing. "Rusty's your old friend, Dad. He's only trying to—"

"You shut up!" he raged. "I'm handling this! No buzzard that runs with nesters is a friend of mine. I'll show him and those other rattlers as sure— Get the boys saddled up—we're ridin'!"

THE girl's eyes darkened. Unmindful of the rheumatism racking his frame, heeding nothing but the spur of rage, Old Brad intended to lead his men against the nesters. And with the first shot, warfare would grip the Broken Hills.

"I'm telling you you're cutting off

your own head, Brad." Rusty's voice held a solemn note of warning. "You've got plenty enemies, Brad, and they'll jump at the chance to climb you. Think of that, man, and think of your girl, before you start something that's going to be mighty hard to finish!"

Deering breathed hard, and his gnarled hand inched toward his six-shooter. "Don't you say the Double Hammer's starting this dance, you sneaking old rattler. It's those thieving nesters and coyotes like you, Rusty Haynes. Yeah, and I got somethin' to say to *you*, mister," swinging fiercely on Lee. "You keep away from my girl. Keep away from her, or I'll blow daylight through you!"

"Seems you're plumb reckless with threats," Lee drawled.

"Why, you snorty young—!"

"Dad!" Darting between the two men, June caught the old man's arm, jerked it sidewise as he clawed for his gun. "Are you crazy? Isn't there enough trouble—"

"Leave me alone!" Deering roared, vainly trying to wrench out of the girl's grasp. "Leave me—get off'n my ranch, both you coyotes. Get off'n the—"

"C'mon, Lee, let's amble." Haynes strode to his pony, swung into the saddle. "Too bad *you* don't own this spread, June. Folks could get along with you. You've got horse sense."

Still holding her father's gun-arm, the girl had a feeling of forlorn hopelessness as Lee and Rusty spurred out of the ranch yard. Her lover and one of her oldest friends were ready to fight the Double Hammer outfit, fight her and hers. They had come in peace—

"Call Shipley, damn it!" Her father's roar crashed on her thoughts as he broke free. "You're not getting away with anything. Call Shipley, I said!"

Old Brad Deering was breathing fast, flames dancing in his eyes. . . .

Crashing Guns

GLANCING swiftly at the old man's grim, anger-flushed face, June knew that anything she could say would only fan the fires of his wrath. But her own lips were set in hard lines, her face masked when Tex Shipley, the slim, tight-lipped foreman, came in.

"Get the boys saddled up," Deering snapped. "We're cleaning out those nesters. The damn no-accounts have grabbed the Sleeping Squaw waterholes." Old Deering cursed. "Break through Hashknife Pass 'bout midnight, and let 'em have it, clean 'em all out. You know how to handle things. Send five-six men down to Hammond's Triangle spread and grab that bunch of whitefaces he's got in Black Rock Canyon. Stampede 'em through that pass before you break through. That'll—"

"Dad!" The cry broke from June's tight lips despite herself. "Why, that's outrageous! You can't do a thing like that!"

"The hell I can't!" He turned on her fiercely. "I'm running things around here! That young whelp and the other little ranchers are running with the nesters, ain't they? Throwing in with 'em agin the Double Hammer?"

"But that'll turn all the small cowmen against us, Dad! For heaven's sake, why are you making more trouble for us—"

"Don't tell me how to handle this thing," he shouted. "Those four-flusher cowmen started this dance, and I'm sure finishing it! Getting soft?"

"No, I'm not getting soft," she flared, her eyes pools of violet flame. "But—"

"Then hit your saddle, you're going with Tex." He turned back to the foreman. "Grab the Triangle steers and stampede 'em through that pass. Shoot down anyone trying to stop

you. There are two hundred of those whitefaces, and they'll clean out any hombres holding that pass when you ride their tails. Follow 'em close, and clean out every mother's son you catch 'round the waterholes. I'd lead the boys myself, if it wasn't for this damn rheumatism. I can hardly sit a horse."

JUNE choked back the angry protests rising from her lips. Her father's orders were the inflexible law on the Double Hammer. He dominated Tex Shipley and all the riders, just as he had always dominated her. She could do nothing here. Though he had placed her in charge of the ranch because he could no longer ride the range and personally direct activities, Brad Deering was still the master of the Double Hammer, she its mistress in name only. June bit her lips, but her eyes were cold as polished glass when she turned to the foreman.

"All right, Tex. We'll wait here until after sundown. The nesters are probably watching us, and we don't want to show our hands before we're ready."

"All right, Miss June," Shipley nodded. "Reckon that'll be all right, Brad?"

Her dark eyes darkened when the foreman turned to Deering for approval of her instructions, but she turned away with assumed indifference, smiling grimly as she caught her father's rumbled assent. He had told her she was in charge of the Double Hammer, had trained her to be hard and domineering as himself —and she was little more than a hired hand. He was going to ruin Lee Hammond and drive him out of the country, because Lee was not afraid of him, would not submit to him.

June had a feeling of fierce revolt against this ruthless old man, and against the life of force and hardness she had always been compelled to live. But her lovely face was unreadable, masked with coldness, as she rode slowly from the ranch yard, mastering the wild urge to clip the pony's flanks with spurred heels. She heard Tex Shipley's crisp voice, glanced back. Men were hurrying across to the corrals.

The girl's lips tightened and her heart leaped. The foreman was sending those riders down to Lee's Triangle ranch. She touched the horse lightly with her spurs, cantered down a gentle slope, then, sure that she could not be seen from the ranch, drove spurs deep. The glow of the late afternoon sun burned along the dusty white trail straight ahead. . . .

WHEN she at last sighted the Triangle, her horse was breathing hard and it was gray with foam and dust, but she still pressed it relentlessly. The rattle of hoofs drumming stony ground came to her as she raced onward, and she whirled her pony, one hand flashing to the gun at her hip. Then, as Lee came pounding out of a little draw, she had a wild sensation of relief.

"Lee, they're going to run your steers out of the Black Rock Canyon and stampede them through Hashknife Pass." It came out in a whirl of words. "I had to tell you. They're coming now."

"June!" He caught her hand, clasped it tightly. "And you risked everything to tell me! Oh, honey!"

"Hurry!" she urged. "You haven't a minute to lose, they were saddling up when I left. They must be almost here."

"But what are *you* going to do? If your father finds you've warned me—"

"He won't know. I couldn't let my own men do such a shameful thing, Lee, I couldn't! It isn't fair. Oh, hurry! Don't worry about me, I'll be all right. I'll keep out of sight until they pass. Oh, *will* you hurry?" She

snatched her hand from his clasp, whirled her pony and raced into a tangle of brush.

She heard the dying drum of hoofs from Lee's rocketing horse as she halted her mount and listened anxiously. A long moment she waited, then pushed cautiously through scattered trees and rocks until her eyes swept the ragged brush fringing the trail.

Suddenly five riders flashed into view, standing out sharply against the cloud-flecked sky. The girl's heart quickened as she watched them lope past. These were her riders, and she had betrayed their coming.

Her hands clenched. Then, instead of slipping away and riding back to the Double Hammer, as she had intended, she wheeled her pony and rode into the draw down which Lee had raced.

She came out on a little belt of grassy earth, hesitated an instant, then followed the horseshoe marks left by Lee's pony in a winding arroyo. Low murmur of voices drifted up to her suddenly, and she slowed her horse to a walk. Far below her a range bull challenged the late afternoon with brazen voice. Again she pushed cautiously forward.

The arroyo abruptly twisted upward, and two minutes later the girl checked her mount in the shadow of a ledge, topping a low rise. Low thunder of galloping hoofs drifted to her through the warm air. They were bold riders, these cowboys of the Double Hammer, or they were confident of their ability to sweep aside all resistance, if resistance appeared.

Then, as she slipped out of the saddle and inched to the edge of the ledge, she spied Lee Hammond. He stood with two cowboys at the narrow mouth of Black Rock Canyon, both hands at his sides. June drew a deep breath.

Thunder of hoofs deepened, and the five Double Hammer riders swept around a bend in the rutted cattle trail.

"Back up!" Hammond's voice snapped like a whip, and he stepped into the trail. "What you fellows wanting?"

THE foremost rider, thick-set, swarthy, with chipmunk eyes, jerked his horse to a plunging halt, forcing the others to wrench reins frantically to avoid crashing into him. Eyes narrowing, he stared at the Triangle cowboys, shot a swift glance at his companions.

"What you fellows wanting?" Lee repeated.

"Howdy, Hammond." The rider showed yellowed teeth in what was meant for a friendly grin. "I'm Link Huckins, of the Double Hammer spread. We're looking for a bunch of beef critters them damn nesters shoved on your land. Saw the cussed polecats do it, but weren't near enough to smoke 'em up. Maybe you'll help me and the boys locate 'em."

June's eyes blazed. "Oh, the liar!" she breathed. "Could Dad have told him—oh, what's the matter with Lee? Can't he see they're spreading *out?*"

"Seems like those cows drifted the other way," Lee drawled. "They sure didn't come in here."

Again Huckins shot his riders a quick look. "They was heading thisaway when we last saw 'em, but I reckon you oughta know. All right, Hammond. If you should happen to see 'em, why—"

Swiftly his hands darted to his hips.

YELLOW flame jetted from the six-guns appearing magically in Lee Hammond's hands. Hills and canyons caught up and flung back crashing gun-thunder. Huckins reeled in his saddle, right-hand gun sliding from fingers, left gripping his broken arm.

Another Double Hammer rider,

stabbing for his weapons, screamed with the pain of lead ripping through his shoulder. The others reached for the sky, staring fearfully at the guns menacing them.

"Keep your hands high, and be plumb careful." Hammond's voice was cold as tinkling ice. "Snakes like you aren't fit to live. Mort, shake 'em down. Look out for hide-out guns!"

Grinning thinly, a scrawny, range-battered puncher pouched his six-shooter and stepped forward. Quickly he stripped the guns from each man, took a weapon from Huckins' shoulder holster, removed the carbines from the saddles. His grin widening as a Double Hammer rider cursed feelingly, he bow-legged back to Hammond and dropped his load.

"Climb down from those saddles!"

Grumbling, the Double Hammer men slid from their horses. They glared sullenly as old Mort took the animals.

"Cripes, feller!" protested a short, beefy puncher. "You're not taking our broncs and setting us afoot? It's six miles to the—"

"You're plumb lucky you can walk," Lee Hammond snapped. "I'm not taking any chance on you buzzards breaking the news to your boss and bringing back a bunch of lead-slingers—not till I'm ready for them. Now get out! I'll turn the horses loose later. Rattle your spurs!"

June Deering slipped back to her pony, her eyes starry with pride in this man she loved. He could have killed Huckins far more easily than shattering his arm. But Lee had not killed him, because he was one of her riders. He was trying to avoid trouble with the Double Hammer because of her.

But the girl's face was grave as she rode back through the draw, headed for her own ranch. Already hating Lee Hammond, her father would be doubly sore at him now. He might even ignore his feud with the nesters long enough to hurl all the might of the Double Hammer outfit against Lee's little Triangle. June's hand tightened convulsively on her reins. Her father knew how to hate, and to act on his hatred. . . .

Hate on the Range

ON THE gravelly slope of the low rise facing Hashknife Pass, the Double Hammer riders waited tensely. It was past midnight, and a young moon, half-veiled by scudding clouds, was slipping to rest behind a distant peak. Still there was no sign of the Triangle steers that were to be used to shear a way through that narrow gateway in the hills.

"Hanged if I can figger it!" muttered Tex Shipley, the tight-lipped foreman. "Link shoulda reached here with those cows two hours ago. Can't be that Hammond caught the boys and spoiled their play. Brad figgered him and his men would be with them nesters. Anyway, Hammond hasn't got but three riders, and he wasn't figgering on us to hit him. Hanged if I can figger it!"

June Deering smiled to herself. It must have been well into the night before Link Huckins and his raging men had reached the Double Hammer ranch house. Six miles, mostly uphill, was a long walk, particularly for cowboys with high-heeled boots, and hampered by two wounded men.

"We'll have to wait, Tex," she said.

The foreman grunted, stirred restlessly, scowled at the dark entrance to the pass. It was barely forty yards wide, fenced on both sides by cliffs that climbed steadily to merge with the black hills beyond. It was the only open way to Sleeping Squaw Canyon from the Double Hammer ranch. Old Brad Deering had taken that canyon from a small ranch years ago.

Shipley reached for papers and tobacco, jerked his hand back with a

muttered oath. He dared not light a match; its glow would betray them, if hostile eyes watched from the black pass.

"We can't stand here fooling all night," he grumbled. "Your dad will be wild if we haven't cleaned out those nesters before sun-up. We've got to *do* something!"

"We don't want to lose any men by running into a trap, Tex. There's some wise old cowmen with those nesters."

The foreman cursed the cowmen softly, turned to stare at his men. Crouching behind protecting rocks, watching like hunting wolves, they were itching to use their guns. Farther back showed the dim shapes of horses in the shadows.

June shifted restlessly behind a ledge. She was praying this night would pass without bloodshed, praying that some miracle would prevent the range war from breaking over the Broken Hills, praying for rain as she looked up at the sky.

Lee was with the cowmen and nesters holding that pass. She was sure of it. And if guns blazed, one of her own bullets might find his courageous heart!

The wind was freshening, growing colder. A coyote suddenly sounded its weird, high crooning, and as though that eerie song was a signal, a thundering blaze of crimson light lashed out from the pass, and a bullet shrieked above Tex Shipley's head.

Instantly Double Hammer rifles answered the thunderous challenge.

GUSHES of flame burst from the pass, leaping at the cowboys. Whipping up her carbine, June flung two swift shots at a blazing gun, instinctively flinching as a hot breath passed her face with the drone of a striking wasp. Lead drummed on the rocks behind which Double Hammer fighters crouched. It rustled brush, cried away in the darkness.

A wounded horse screamed horribly, crashed down, kicking. Gaunt hills and black canyon depths prolonged and re-echoed the rolling currents of sound. Then, as abruptly as it had commenced, the crashing gun-thunder stilled. Queer silence throbbed through the night, wrapping the range in breathless suspense.

"Hug cover, boys!" Tex Shipley's voice was curiously flat and low. "They're just trying to make us figger they've lit out. You all right, Miss June?"

"Yes—are you? That's fine!" She was reloading her rifle, aware, with a kind of mild surprise, that her hands were steady, and the wild throbbing of her heart had ceased.

"Some nervous nester touched off those fireworks," the foreman commented. "I'm betting he's getting cussed good and plenty. Well, we know, now, that pass is plumb fenced with leadslingers."

A long silence while they watched the grim pass. Then, "We can't break through that pass, Tex, we'd lose too many men." June's voice was crisp. "And we can't wait here for sunrise—we're too exposed. We'll have to move back to the top of this rise and keep them from coming out."

She was the fighting daughter of old Brad Deering now. Nesters' guns had started this fight, and the Double Hammer would never be driven from its own.

"I hate to send word to Brad that we haven't got them waterholes," Shipley growled. "Damn that Huckins! If he'd brought those Triangle steers, we'd have gone through that pass like the devil riding sinners. We should have planted some of our men in that pass in the first place!"

"You're right, Tex. It's my fault. I should have foreseen that those nesters would—"

"It's not your fault more than mine and Brad's. We weren't figgering the cowmen'd throw in with the nesters."

June shrugged. "It can't be helped now. We'll have to wait for a chance to break through. You hold this rise and keep those coyotes busy, and I'll ride back to the ranch. I'll send out ammunition and supplies."

"Reckon there ain't no other way, Miss June," assented the foreman gloomily. "Brad'll be hog-wild, but those fools are hugging cover, and we'll be standing out like black cows agin the moon, come sunup. But I sure hate to think we're bogged down by a bunch of nesters!"

SILENTLY the cowboys led their ponies up and over the slope, expectant every instant of a leaden blast from the pass. Behind the rise they tethered their mounts in a grassy hollow, then dropped in the shelter of boulders and ledges and watched grimly for sight of the foe. Two men were slightly wounded, but stoutly insisted they were in no need of attention.

The girl mounted her coal-black gelding, glancing about before clipping the animal with her heels. With the touch of steel, the black snorted and tossed his proud head, then went racing toward the southwest. In the east the skies were graying.

June's thoughts were racing as the horse burned up the miles.

There was no hope of peace now. Nesters' guns had proclaimed the range war that she and Lee and the other cowmen had hoped to avert. The nesters were as eager for war as her father.

Her thoughts flew to Lee Hammond, and again she seemed to feel his arms around her, the thrill of his lips on hers. Had he been in the pass with the nesters? Could it be that Double Hammer lead had struck him down—perhaps one of the bullets she had flung at those flaming guns? She shivered.

But if he were still safe, what chance had he to survive, if her own father was resolved to crush him? The Triangle was small and weak—it could not successfully resist an attack by the powerful Double Hammer outfit.

BRIGHT fingers of the dawn tinted the craggy hills with rose and gold as June neared the Double Hammer ranch buildings. The rising sun tossed little dancing lights on Wolf Creek's rippling waters, caressed the green sweep of rangeland. The stirring wind breathed pungent spice of sage, and from a tangle of wild rose bushes, a bird burst into joyous song. It seemed incredible that savage hatreds had pitched their tents in this land of beauty and valiant hearts.

Stripping the riding-gear from her tired black, June turned the animal into the corral, then walked briskly to the house. Old Brad Deering straightened in his big comfortable leather chair as she entered the living room, his lips tight with pain. For long hours the devils of rheumatism had been torturing him.

"Well, did you clean out those buzzards?" he barked. "What happened down there?"

She told him, briefly, meeting his wrathful glare unflinchingly when he burst into rage. With pity she saw his pain-drawn face, his gnarled hands trembling, and dared not try to comfort him. He had always repulsed her affectionate impulses, deeming them a weakness—had always tried to crush all her warm feminine impulses and make her as hard and grim as himself.

"Blocked by a bunch of land-grabbers! The Double Hammer letting a bunch of blockhead nesters bar us from our own waterholes!" He was roaring. "Scared to slam through that pass and clean 'em out! It's all that damn Hammond's fault. If that—yeah, that's something more I'm telling you!"

He reared up from the chair, dropped back with a groan, hands pressing his tortured limbs. "That young good-for-nothing held up them boys I sent down to grab his steers. Drilled Link Huckins and Ed Bates, damn him! Some double-crossing varmint on this ranch must have tipped him we were coming. Some cold-decking—"

"He must have been watching us," June interrupted coolly, hoping her face was unreadable. "You told him and Rusty Haynes you'd run them out of the—"

"It was somebody on the Double Hammer, I tell you! Link says he smelled dust all the way to the Triangle."

June shrugged. "A Triangle rider could have watched us and ridden ahead of our men, couldn't he? He'd know Link and his men weren't streaking down there for nothing."

Deering snorted. "There's something mighty funny about it. If I ever catch any traitor on my payroll, I'll gun him, even if it's the last thing I ever do." He slammed his fist down on his chair-arm. "And that young rattler of a Hammond isn't living long enough to boast about what *he* did. I've sent Bat Tucker and a dozen men down to his place to take care of him. They'll clean up the blasted place."

Panic surged through the girl, but she kept it from her eyes.

"You know what that means." Her voice was steady. "Every little cowman on this range will throw in against us!"

"I don't give a damn if the devil himself lines up with 'em!" Deering roared. "No cussed coyote can tangle me in his loop and get away with it!"

Again she shrugged, pretending indifference. "All right. Send some grub and ammunition out to Tex Shipley and his men. I'm turning in. I need a little sleep."

But the mask dropped from her face as she gained her room, and sobs shook her.

Lee was in deadly peril, and she couldn't help. . . .

Gregory Cracks the Whip

FLINGING herself down on her bed, June buried her face in the pillow, burdened with a pain in throat and breast so bitter that tears flooded her dark eyes. Her father was determined to crush Lee, and she could see no way to stop him.

In the hours that followed, June wrestled with the black despair gripping her, vainly striving to find some way out of this horror. Finally she could endure it no longer. Slipping from bed, she washed her face, tucked back locks of her straying chestnut curls, and hurried from the house, hardly conscious of her father's booming voice and the big black stallion standing in the shade of the gnarled cottonwood near the front porch.

She would saddle her favorite bay gelding and ride down to the soothing waters of Wolf Creek. She didn't want to be in the Double Hammer ranch house when the riders came back from their raid on the Triangle. She could not, would not, endure her father's gloating over Lee Hammond.

She turned sharply as someone called her name, and her eyes narrowed. Reed Gregory was lumbering toward her. She had always disliked this great, soft lump of a man, and her aversion mounted as she regarded his flabby, deceitful face. There was something slippery about the lawyer.

"I was afraid you would ride off before I could speak with you, June." He was mopping his face with a big handkerchief. "Your father told me you were sleeping, and I've been waiting. I have something to discuss with you. May I suggest that we walk over to yonder pine?"

She gave him a swift glance. What did this man know?

Watching her red lips tighten, Gregory inched closer. "I have something of the utmost importance to talk over with you, June. Others must not hear us."

"All right, Mr. Gregory."

SHE turned and walked briskly across to the ragged pine, which lifted its towering height some fifty yards from the house. No one could approach them unseen; there was no nearby shelter for curious ears.

"I have just had a long talk with your father," began the lawyer. "He is somewhat disconcerted over this friction with the nesters and small ranchers, and it is indeed a situation freighted with the gravest consequences. Having been your father's legal adviser so many years, I am, of course, deeply interested in his welfare and the welfare of the Double—Why did you rush down to the Triangle yesterday afternoon?"

Intuition had prepared her for that sudden question. Her head lifted and she regarded him with cold, contemptuous eyes.

"Since when, Mr. Gregory, have you had the idea you could ask insolent questions on the Double Hammer?"

"Don't try anything like that with *me*, my girl!" His teeth clicked and a hooded tiger stared out from his brown eyes. "You went down there and warned Lee Hammond!"

She met his triumphant glare with eyes cold as ice. "You are insulting! Get off this ranch—and don't come back!"

The oily grin again creased his flabby face. "Your bluff won't work, my dear. I'm wondering what would happen if I told Brad Deering that his own daughter had rushed down and warned Lee Hammond that her father's men were after his steers—did it because she loves the fellow!"

He laughed softly as quick anger flung crimson into her wind-tanned cheeks. "I am also wondering what Brad would say—and do—if someone convinced him that his daughter *knew* the nesters had seized his waterholes, and concealed the fact from him."

"If you go to my father with any of your lies," June blazed, "I'll shoot you!"

His grin widened. "I don't doubt that you'd like to do it, my dear, but it would not do you any good. If Brad ever knows what you and I know, he'll kill Lee Hammond on sight, and he'll thrash you within an inch of your life. He isn't always going to be crippled with rheumatism, you know. And I'll tell him, June Deering," Gregory's flabby face hardened, "if you don't play the game straight with me."

"You bullying coward!" Her eyes glowing like embers, June stood defiant, vivid as flame.

"Don't call names, June." Gregory raised a fat, soft hand. "You hurt my feelings, my dear—and you and I can't afford to quarrel. You have too much at stake. Now, you've got to quit fighting your father. I'm his old friend, and I can't let you wreck the Double Hammer. It's unthinkable!"

GREGORY rubbed his hands together. His plan to plunge the Broken Hills into the red welter of range war had been temporarily checked by the failure of the nesters and Double Hammer riders to lock in a death-grapple at Hashknife Pass. The nesters, the small ranchers, and the Double Hammer outfit must be thinned by killers' lead before Reed Gregory could claim this ranch for his own.

Until men died, there would always be danger of compromise and eventual peace. He could handle Brad Deering. And this girl who stood in his way must be mastered. He had something to hold over her now. He grinned slyly.

"The nesters are not only after your Sleeping Squaw water, June. They're scheming to take away the best part of your ranch—they and the small ranchers. They're working together, and they'll—"

"I don't believe it," she cried. "You know and I know that the nesters are desperately in need of water. And men like Lee Hammond and Rusty Haynes aren't the kind to steal land or anything else from the Double Hammer or any other outfit!"

"That's the trusting woman in you talking, my dear, it isn't the girl old Brad trained to take over the Double Hammer when he's gone. I'm afraid he made a mistake. I tell you I have positive proof that the nesters and small ranchers are after this ranch, and I'm going to help Brad hold his own."

"You haven't a thing to say about the Double Hammer, Reed Gregory," she challenged. "Not a thing! Just because you're Dad's lawyer, you're not going to—"

"I've told you that I'm going to help Brad. You try to stop me, my dear, and it will be my unpleasant duty to inform your father that his daughter is secretly fighting him. Don't look at me like that! I'm only doing my duty—your own good."

JUNE bit her lips, hot anger whipping through her. This man had threatened to go to her father and tell everything if she fought him—and the black-hearted devil would do it—she could read it in his evil eyes. She could not know that Gregory was only shrewdly guessing that she had warned Lee Hammond of the coming of the Double Hammer riders.

She did know that he held a whip over her. And she also knew that her father's rage against her and Lee would be maniacal if he learned she had warned Lee and helped the nesters. Her hands clenched and unclenched helplessly.

"June, don't think I'm your enemy." Gregory's voice crashed in on her racing thoughts. "I'm trying to help your father—and you. Brad's old, and sick, and crippled. You're a lovely girl, June, and it isn't right or natural for Brad or anyone else to pretend you're a man. Women don't understand the things men have to do. I want to be your friend, June. I've always been fond of you. Sometimes I've even ventured to dream—"

She stared at him in amazement. There was something loathesome about his flabby face, his soft hands, his shrewd, hard brown eyes meshed in puffy flesh, the huge soft bulk of him. The thought of his repulsive lips on hers filled her with horror.

Glimpsing her contempt and disgust, Gregory's eyes reddened with anger and wounded pride, but he choked back the wrathful words rising to his lips. He had engaged in too many savage legal battles to lose his temper in this girl's presence.

He had her where he wanted her, and when his hour struck, she would do as he willed. She wouldn't be so haughty when she had lost the Double Hammer. And if all else failed, he would win the Double Hammer by forcing her to marry him. He held over her a two-thonged whip—fear for her lover's safety and dread of her father's rage—and he would use that whip.

There was a tense silence. Then: "Brad tells me he's determined to clean out Hammond and his Triangle outfit," he said brutally. "There's nothing you or I can do about it. And he's more than ever determined on driving out those nesters. He's right, too. Either the nesters must go, or the Double Hammer must. There isn't room on this range for—Here come your riders, from that raid on Hammond's spread."

June wheeled, stared at the group of horsemen cantering easily toward the corrals.

THE white powder of alkali coated both men and ponies, and the animals bore the marks of hard riding. She met them as they drew rein beside the gaunt pole corrals, her face cold and composed, but her heart sick with dread.

"Well?" she said crisply.

Bat Tucker, a lean weasel of a man, shrugged his shoulders disgustedly. "That jasper is sure slick, Miss June. We combed that spread plumb complete, and there was nary a sign of Hammond nor his men, nor a single cow. That jasper must've had a hunch we're coming, and lit out."

June looked down at her boot-toe to hide the gladness in her eyes. Lee had outwitted old Brad Deering again. He was too clever to be caught and crushed. Her heart thrilled with pride.

"That hombre is sure shot with luck," grumbled another cowboy, "or he's slicker'n a ten-year coyote. We'd oughta burned the hombre's roost out."

"He's gointa make us plenty trouble till he's salted down," Bat Tucker added harshly. "I've knowed hombres like him, and they're plumb poison. Brad'll go straight up, Miss June, when you tell him, but we did our—"

"You'll have to tell him, Bat," she interrupted, carefully keeping her elation from her voice, "I'm riding."

And turning her back squarely on the wheezing Gregory, she went into the stable, took down her pegged gear and saddled a slim-legged sorrel. Lee was safe and well. Her heart sang it as she led the horse into the bright sunlight. Even the menace Reed Gregory held over her seemed a shadowy thing at that moment.

Somehow, some way, she would outwit that loathesome lawyer and save the Broken Hills from the horrors of a range war—she and Lee—dear, gallant Lee.

Her father's furious roar rolled to her as she rode off, and June smiled.

Menace Thickens

LOPING through the burning sunlight, the Double Hammer ranch behind and jagged ridges far ahead, June felt the surge of elation ebbing from her. Lee had escaped Bat Tucker and his men this time, but sooner or later he would be cornered by the vengeful Double Hammer riders, or driven from the Broken Hills. And Reed Gregory meant to have his way.

The girl's blue eyes gleamed resentfully and her hands tightened to fists. She might be able to explain satisfactorily her failure to report the seizure of Sleeping Squaw water by the nesters, but old Brad Deering's rage would be deadly when he learned she had warned Lee that Double Hammer men were after his cattle.

Reed Gregory was the only man in all the Broken Hills country Brad Deering trusted, excepting his foreman, Tex Shipley, and one or two of his old cowmen. If the lawyer told him that she was aiding Lee and trying to prevent war between the nesters and the Double Hammer outfit, old Brad would believe him. And Gregory *would* tell him, unless she did as he commanded.

Angry lights in her eyes deepened. Why was he so eager to have the Double Hammer and the nesters leaping at each others' throats? He knew the nesters' desperate need for water; knew other cowmen were aiding them to survive. Yet he was urging Brad Deering to fight, fanning the old man's hate of nesters.

Could it be that Reed Gregory was scheming to gain control of the Double Hammer? Was he even planning to force her to marry him, so he could become master of the ranch?

"I'll never marry that loathesome beast," she cried out, "no matter what happens. I won't, I won't. I'll shoot him first! I'll leave the ranch before I'll—"

Then other thoughts flashed on her. If the lawyer was actually plotting to take the Double Hammer from Brad Deering, she must stay here and fight for her father—hard and grim though he was, he *was* her father. But what could she do? Deering would never believe that evil lurked behind Gregory's apparent friendship, until it was too late. And she had no proof that the lawyer was a deadly, secret enemy.

HER horse loped down the winding course of an arroyo, broke into a run as it neared the rippling waters of Wolf Creek. June dismounted and dropped down in the long grass fringing the stream. Wind ruffled the water, sighed softly through the overhanging tangle of piñon branches. It was filled with restful peace, this place. She reached a brown hand toward the inviting water.

At the sound of a pebble rolling down the bank behind her, she turned with a start and looked up, to see Lee Hammond smiling down on her. Then he was beside her, had captured one of her hands in his.

"I was watching with a pair of field-glasses when you angled around the trail, and I had a hunch you were coming down here. So I came running. Gosh, honey, but I'm glad to see you!" Lifting her hand to his lips, he kissed the soft palm.

"Oh, Lee, I'm so glad you got away from Bat and his men!" Her eyes were starry. "I didn't know they had gone down to your ranch in time to warn you. You were too smart for them, weren't you, Lee?" She reached up her free hand and burrowed her fingers into his mop of blond hair.

"Had a hunch your dad would be hunting my hair," he grinned, "so we cleared out from the Triangle last night. The steers are celebrating in a cow-heaven on old Terry Shane's TS layout, and I'm—"

"On the TS?" June cried. "Do you mean that Terry Shane is helping the nesters?"

Lee nodded. "Rusty Haynes and yours truly held a long pow-wow with Terry last night. We made heap big peace medicine. Terry's been in too many range wars to want another, and he's letting the nesters use his Deep Hole water."

"Then every single rancher and nester is against the Double Hammer?"

"Does kind of seem like the Double Hammer is by its lonesome, hon. Hey, quit scalping me!" His arm slipped around her, drew her close.

"Oh, Lee, I'm nearly wild! I don't know what to do. Dad won't listen to a thing I say; he's determined to run you and the nesters out of the country. It's awful, the way he's after you." Her voice broke. "And—and Reed Gregory—is after me."

BREATHLESSLY, June told him everything, finding sweet comfort in the tightening of his arm about her and the touch of his lips on her palm.

"The dirty, double-crossing rattler!" Lee grated when she paused, "I'll get that sneaking buzzard! Cracking down on a girl!"

"Lee, you've got to be careful." Her arms went around his neck. "Gregory's like a snake. He makes my flesh creep. I've always hated him —but Dad thinks he's his best friend."

Lee bent his head swiftly, kissed her mouth. And June nestled closer to his heart, her lips clinging to his.

"We're going to beat Gregory, dearest," he comforted. "We're going to win out. And, honey-girl, if anything happens, you streak for the TS. Terry says you'll always be welcome."

She straightened in his arms. "Lee, do you think—?"

"June, there's something behind

this trouble that's got us all puzzled. None of us cowmen want to tangle with the Double Hammer, and most of the nesters feel the same. But there's a few of them—tough, gun-slinging newcomers—who are bawling for a fight and trying to stir up the others. I'm betting my horse against a plugged dime that Gregory is behind 'em."

"He said the nesters and small ranchers were scheming to take the best part of the Double Hammer from us."

"He's a liar, honey, and he knows he is. He's just trying to make trouble, so he can profit from it. And now that we know he's up to something, we'll be watching him."

JUNE drew a deep breath. "Oh, Lee, be careful! Last night, down at that pass, I was so afraid you might get hurt. If anything happens to you, I—I—"

"I wasn't even there, hon," Lee smiled, "and I was sure hoping *you* weren't. I was too busy rounding up my cows and drifting them to the TS. Old Rusty Haynes told me he turned his gun loose as a sort of warning to your men to keep out. Didn't want you to get hurt."

"That was sweet of him," June said softly, her lips curved in a tender smile. And then the old fear came, and she drew away from his arms.

"Lee, you've got to go—someone might have seen you come here, or followed me. That Gregory has someone watching me, or he wouldn't know so much. You've got to go. Right away."

"All right, hon." Lee kissed her swiftly, was on his feet in a single twist of his lithe body, tugging up his sagging gun-belt. "We don't want to be caught down here. Don't worry, June. You've plenty of friends among the small ranchers—they know you're trying to stop trouble—and we'll handle Gregory. And if anything happens, you light out for the TS."

June watched him climb quickly up the bank to his horse, hidden from the trail by a clump of low willows, and saw him whip out his field-glasses. A long moment he studied open range and gaunt hills, then turned and waved assuringly to her. She breathed relief as the drumming of his pony's hoofs receded, died away.

She spoke softly to her restless horse, quieting its fretful pawing, and turned back to the creek. Peace came to her.

There was some way out of this trouble brooding over the Broken Hills, and she and Lee would find that way. The splendid courage of the West beat in her blood.

LONG shadows lay over Double Hammer ranch buildings when June rode slowly toward the barn where she and her father kept their own favorite saddle horses. The sun was slipping behind a cloud-hung peak, and the keen wind was redolent of pine and sage.

Suddenly, her eyes narrowing, she checked her pony and stared at a little knot of strange men gathered near the open door of the bunkhouse. Then, as one of them stared up at her with insolent eyes, a grin twisting his hard mouth, anger whipped through her.

The man was Buck Stroud, the man she had quirted and disarmed in Hashknife Pass when the nesters had barred her way to the Sleeping Squaw water holes! This man had snarled his hate of the Double Hammer, had insulted and threatened her. And now he was here! Rigid as rock, she continued to stare at him, her hand tightening on her quirt.

Then the truth flashed on her. Stroud and his hard-faced companions were Reed Gregory's men—and her father had hired them!

Quivering with anger, June sent

the sorrel plunging toward the stable, hot color rising in her cheeks as she heard Stroud's mocking laugh. Whipping the riding-gear from the pony, she turned the animal into a stall, raced out and stormed into the house.

Old Brad Deering, seated in a battered chair at his scarred desk, looked up with a scowl as she strode into his office. "Where the devil you been keeping yourself?" he boomed. "This is no time—"

"What are those strange men doing here?" Her voice, vibrating with anger, cut through his booming bass.

"I've hired 'em. They're good riders, and plumb smart with guns."

"But they're nesters! I saw them—"

"Gregory hired 'em away from them land-grabbing fools. Those nesters are hiring gunmen to fight my cowhands, and Gregory is helping me to protect—"

"But you're hiring killers who'll turn on us the minute someone offers them more money! Are you letting that two-faced Gregory—"

"Don't call Reed Gregory two-faced!" Old Brad's hair was bristling. "He's my friend—the best friend a man ever had. And I'm running this ranch, do you hear? Those nesters and small ranchers are after this spread, and I'm running every last one of them outa this country. Don't you tell me what to do—*I'm* running things!"

Night Riders

SLUMPING down more comfortably in his creaking swivel-chair, Reed Gregory chewed meditatively on the big cigar between his lips. He had done well. Buck Stroud and three of his gunmen were on the Double Hammer payroll; five others called themselves nesters. And all were his chosen killers, under orders to force the range war that would make Reed Gregory master of the Double Hammer ranch.

The small ranchers were striving to avoid war with the Double Hammer, but when their cattle and cowboys were shot down from ambush, their guns would leap into blazing battle. The grin crept slowly across the lawyer's flabby face and he chuckled softly.

June Deering had blocked his plan to strew Hashknife Pass with human wreckage, but there would be no defense against killer lead. He had enough gunmen to seize the Double Hammer when it had been sufficiently weakened by the enemies he had planted against it, and with war flaming over the range, there would be nothing strange about it if a bullet found old Brad Deering's heart.

Acting as Deering's attorney, he would take over the ranch when the old man was out of the way—and he'd hold it with his gunmen. If anything happened to June while the war raged, it would be too bad, but —he shrugged. Meanwhile, he held the girl in his power. She was his any time.

He looked up as the office door opened and Lee Hammond strode in. Gregory's brown eyes narrowed, then his face creased in the expansive grin his clients knew so well. But he shifted in his chair so that his right hand was near the partly opened drawer, where a heavy gun rested.

"Well, what's on your mind, my boy?" Gregory greeted him heartily.

"The usual thing that rides a fellow to a lawyer," Hammond grinned. "Trouble." His hands itched to grip Gregory's throat, but he had to play a crafty game. He had not missed that furtive shifting of the man's body.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable." Gregory nodded toward a chair. "What's happened, my boy?"

Lee continued to stand. "You know there's a range war brewing here, and something's got to be done pronto, or it'll be too late. Everybody

wants peace except Brad Deering and a few killers from outside. I'm doing my best to stop it! I cleared out of my ranch this morning to avoid showdown with Deering. And—"

"JUST a moment, my boy!" The lawyer held up a soft, plump hand. "Are you planning to sue Brad Deering for damages to your ranch?"

Hammond laughed shortly. "I'm asking you, as Brad Deering's lawyer, to use your influence with him to *stop* this trouble."

Gregory bent forward, his eyes narrowing. "So that's it!" he said softly. "Sit down, my boy, sit down!" It made him uneasy to have Hammond standing, but the cowman continued to ignore the invitation to be seated. "I am as anxious as you are, my boy, to prevent a range war—it's bad for the community—but Deering feels he's the wronged party. The nesters have seized his waterholes, and they refuse to surrender them."

"But he *knows* the nesters must have water!"

The lawyer shrugged. "My client isn't interested in what the nesters want, my boy, he's determined to drive them out. The only way that trouble can be averted is for the nesters to get out of Sleeping Squaw Canyon."

"They'll never do it. They've got to have that water or die. All of us ranchers have shared our water with them. Every one of us is helping these people to survive but Brad Deering."

Again Gregory shrugged. "I'm sorry, sincerely sorry, but my client will fight as long as the nesters hold his waterholes. You can tell them that, Hammond, and tell your fellow ranchers. Tell them they might just as well make up their minds they've got to fight. Between ourselves—and this must go no further—I've tried to talk Deering into being more reasonable. I've pointed out that the nesters need water, and that he stands alone in the refusal to help those poor devils. I've tried to avert any trouble, and—"

"You're a yellow liar!" Hammond burst out, and stepped toward the lawyer. "I know you! You're egging Deering on. You've planted a bunch of your killers with the nesters, and you've threatened June Deering, you—"

He leaped as Gregory's cushion-like hand dived toward the gun hidden in the partly opened drawer. His fist thudded on Gregory's face, his fingers dug into flabby flesh, choking off the shriek in the lawyer's throat. This coyote, this rattlesnake, had threatened June, was holding a whip over her—and striving to plunge the rangeland into a sea of blood!

THE chair went down with a crash, and Hammond went to the floor, crushing the struggling lawyer under him. Again and again his fist hammered that flabby face, and his fingers dug deeper into that gross throat.

He sprang up from Gregory's thrashing body, glared down at him with anger-reddened eyes, fighting the fury still gripping him, battling the desire to pound this beastly excuse for a man to a pulp.

Groaning hoarsely, the lawyer struggled to a sitting position, hands caressing his throat. His eyes stood out with pain and terror.

Lee Hammond breathed hard "You're rotten!" he choked. "Skunks like you aren't fit to live. You bother June Deering again, or even open that mouth of yours against her, and I'll break your neck! And you'd better call off this range war, mister, if you want to save your own measly hide!"

He flung away, strode from the place, still fighting the urge to leap on Gregory and kill him. Riding down

Hackamore's dusty main street and into the sun-washed trail leading back to the range, his hazel eyes smoldered back of narrowed lids. Why hadn't he let Gregory get that hidden gun? Then he could have shot the man!

Lee swore bitterly. He had entered the lawyer's den hoping that Gregory would make a gun play. And now the man was a greater menace than ever.

Lee Hammond's hands tightened. Gregory would urge old Brad Deering to strike at him with all his power. He must fight the Double Hammer, or be driven from the Broken Hills. He had to fight June's father—and he loved that girl more than life itself. . . .

THE keen evening wind, sweeping down from western heights, whirled dust-clouds across the range. Clouds scudded across graying heavens, blanketed the setting sun. There was the electric feel of trouble in the air.

The brief desert twilight, shadowed by swirling dust, wrapped the bluish hills when Lee Hammond loped into a wide canyon cutting through a maze of low ridges. His gray pony suddenly flung up its head and nickered. From behind a rocky upthrust, horses answered the challenge. Lee straightened in the saddle. He was near the camp he and his friends had pitched in a small basin at the foot of lofty cliffs.

Ten minutes and he was pushing through an opening so narrow that his stirrups scraped the wall. He rode on into a pocket cluttered with rocks.

Four or five men, sprawled by a tiny camp fire, looked up at the sound of the approaching pony and called greetings. Farther back stood several saddled horses.

"Well?" queried old Rusty Haynes a half-hour later, after the meal of biscuit, bacon and steaming coffee, as he rolled a cigarette. "Find out anything?"

"Had a run-in with that Gregory law shark," Hammond said. Briefly he told of the lawyer's threats against June and his own clash with the man. "I'm only sorry that I didn't kill the fool!" he finished savagely.

"Too bad you didn't," Haynes agreed. He drew a slow breath of smoke, puffed it out. "Too bad you didn't, Lee. He'll be worse'n a locoed bronc now. Must be *he's* the polecat that planted those gunslicks with the nesters and is egging them on to tear things wide open. They're itching for the Double Hammer cowhands to crack down on that pass."

"Yeah, and there's something else that's mighty funny," growled a grizzled rider. "That gun-fanning Buck Stroud and three of his gang snuk out this afternoon and loped down to the Double Hammer. I was watching from that big rock in Five-Mile Canyon—"

"What?" Lee was on his feet, eyes narrowed. "You mean Stroud and his gang have joined up with Deering?"

The other nodded. "Sure looks that way. They loped in like they owned the spread, and they sure didn't come drifting back. Reckon old Brad musta hired 'em."

Lee Hammond charged across to his horse, flung himself into the saddle. "Stroud and his skunks are Gregory's men," he gritted, as the others stared up at him. "I'm sure of it! Gregory must have persuaded old Deering to hire them. They're up to some deviltry—maybe they're after June. I'm streaking for the Double Hammer." He sent his pony toward the narrow opening.

"Hey, hold on a minute, you young fool!" Rusty Haynes leaped after him. "You can't do nothing on that spread, not lone-handed you can't! They'll fill you so full of lead, it'll pay to mine you!"

Lee laughed savagely, and as the pony slipped through the gap, he raked it with spurred heels.

Foreboding rode with him, and a nameless dread, as the spirited gray swept through the gloom enveloping the range. Lightning suddenly flared along the ridges, momentarily flooding the country with weird radiance. The swirling dust-clouds thickened.

"Sure looks like a storm's coming down, old-timer," Lee muttered to the nervous pony. "It'll do this range a world of good—provided it ain't too late," he added softly.

The gray was racing onward like a pale shadow, speeding through arroyos, skirting canyons, increasing its pace as it swept into a wide flat. Lightning was running along the high places now almost continuously, slashing open the black heavens. From the west broke the mutter of thunder.

Then, far ahead and to the left, Lee saw the lights of the Double Hammer ranch. His jaws tightened and the cold glints in his eyes deepened.

And behind, in the little camp he had left, raging, cursing men were rushing for their horses.

"There's a bunch of 'em streaking for the Double Hammer with hell in their hearts," a dust-coated rider was yelling. "Those stranger gunslicks, and a bunch of young nesters! We gotta round up the boys and head 'em off, afore hell breaks loose!"

Range Courage

GENTLY closing the door of her own room, June Deering slipped through the dark hall, paused a moment to scan the dimly lit living room, then flitted across to the long porch at the rear of the house. From the glowing bunkhouse came hoarse voices and roaring laughter, suddenly subdued by the reverberating crash of thunder.

Her eyes sweeping the yard, the girl shrank back instinctively as a rending flash of lighting lit up the world. Then crashing thunder shook the earth. June clutched her slicker tightly. Splendid fighter though she was, she was afraid of these storms.

She had quarreled bitterly with old Brad Deering over the hiring of Buck Stroud and his men, cried out to him that he was Reed Gregory's puppet, and stormed furiously from his office, finally, convinced of the hopelessness of further argument, leaving the old man purple with rage. Too angry and humiliated to eat, she had ignored the mellow clanging of the cook's triangle—and old Brad had not sent for her.

Crouching in the shelter of a vine which veiled an end of the porch, she again searched the yard with swift glances as the lightning flamed, searching for possible lurking forms. Buck Stroud filled her with something akin to fear. She knew the man hated her with a savage hate, that he would lose no opportunity to take his revenge for the quirting she had given him that morning in Hashknife Pass. And she knew that he was here for no good.

She felt for the six-shooters swinging at her hip, beneath her slicker, feeling comforted as her fingers touched the weapon. Her shoulders straightened, even as thunder again shook the earth. It would be terrifying, that ride through lashing lightning, rioting thunder, drenching rain, and over slippery, crumbling trails—but she was going to the Double Hammer riders facing the nesters at Hashknife Pass.

She was going to tell them of the coming of Buck Stroud and his gunmen, lead them back to the home ranch, and drive the killers from the Double Hammer range. Her father would roar and rage, but he would be too late to do anything. June's lips tightened. She was saving him from his own folly, guarding him from the treachery of Reed Gregory.

She stared a moment at the glowing, noisy bunkhouse, noticed three

horses at the hitch-rail as lightning flared. Then she slipped from the porch and ran toward the dark bulk of the stable, flinching as lightning slashed the night so close that its hiss was like that of a gigantic snake. Thunder crashed low, then the world was smothered by a deluge of swishing, pounding rain.

HER head bowed to the storm, the girl sped through the blackness, gained the barn as another blinding flash rent the heavens. Rain drummed on the roof, and wind giants shook the shuddering building, howling in primitive glee. The thunder now was almost a continuous, terrifying inferno of sounds. She heard the nervous snortings and squealings of the frightened horses, glimpsed their wild eyes and tossing manes, as lightning forked luridly.

She darted to the wall, groped in the sudden gloom for her pegged riding gear. She quaked as reverberating thunder rocked the earth, but her eyes glowed with unshaken purpose. She plucked down her gear, started for the nearest horse.

Then a scream burst from her tight throat, for steely hands clamped down on her shoulders from behind, brutal hands that forced her to her knees. Fighting furiously, she twisted and struggled to reach her gun.

"No you don't!" snarled Buck Stroud's voice, and her arm was gripped and twisted behind her back. "Quit fighting, you little hellcat, or I'll break your arm!"

Blinding torture went through her as the gunman twisted her arm savagely. She felt his free hand roving for her six-shooter. He jerked it from the holster and dropped it in the hay.

"Let me go!" she panted. "Quit—quit twisting!"

"Figgered you were up to something," he grated. "Saw you hugging that porch, and figgered you—"

The words were muffled by the crashing roll of thunder. He pulled her to her feet, twisted her around, thrust his face close to hers.

"Going for a ride, eh? And in this storm! Well, my girl, you're riding all right—but you're riding with *me!*"

She flung her strong, slim body against his, striving to trip him, struggling to wrench away from the steel fingers biting into her arms, her dark eyes pools of defiance. He cursed as she stamped on his foot, and jerked her closer.

"Quit it! I'll break you in two if you don't!" He pinned her arms to her sides, shook her savagely. "Get snorty with me, and I'll handle you just like I would a man. Go on and yell—nobody'll hear you in this storm!"

"Let me go! I'll—"

"You're going to learn who's boss around here before you're much older," Stroud taunted. "I'm taking you to a nice little hideout I know. Nobody'll be able to follow us, not with this rain washing out all sign. And when we get there, I'm sure paying you for that quirting you gave me, with a few fancy decorations thrown in." He laughed gratingly. "And you—"

Booming thunder drowned his gloating. His hard hands still clamping her arms to her sides, Stroud jerked the girl around and shoved her ahead of him, out of the barn and into the thunderous storm, shaking her fiercely when she fought. He was heading for the horses at the hitch-rack, near the bunkhouse.

WAITING in the barn for June to walk into his trap, Buck Stroud had determined to take what fortune was coming to him. He would take the girl to a lonely canyon beyond the Broken Hills, then force her to marry him, so the Double Hammer ranch would be his when old Brad Deering was out of the way.

Reed Gregory he despised, as wolf-hearted gunmen always scorn softer men. Buck Stroud gave no fidelity to anyone but himself, and recognized no code but the law of might. A cold, ruthless killer, he was supremely confident of his ability to hold June and the Double Hammer against Reed Gregory or anyone else.

He chuckled as the girl flung herself sidewise and struggled frantically to escape. "Regular wildcat, huh? Well, I sorta like your fighting ways, June. There's no fun in taming a woman that won't fight, and I'm sure—"

There was a soft scurry behind him as the lightning's dazzling flare cleft the gloom, the rush of a charging form. Rasping a startled oath, Stroud wheeled, dragging the girl by one arm, his free hand darting to the gun tied down at his left hip. Rock-hard fists thudded against his head, his jaw.

The gunman went back with a snarl, loosening his grip on the girl's arm as he whipped out his six-shooter. He cursed as grinding fingers bit into his gun-arm, twisted it viciously. A smashing fist caught him full in the mouth.

June wrenched free, leaped away, peered through the beating rain and gloom with straining eyes.

THUNDER pounded the shuddering air. And then lightning ripped open the night, and she saw two locked, straining, thrashing bodies. Saw Lee Hammond twist Stroud's arm sidewise and drive a savage fist to the gunman's ribs. Darkness came back like an inky sea. Then two stabbing jets of flame lashed out, but the barking of Stroud's gun was drowned by the thunder. June's hands flew to her throat.

Another hissing flash from the black heavens, and she saw Stroud leap backward, a hand whipping to his armpit. Lee sprang on him. There was a flash and muffled report as blackness swirled down.

"June!"

Lee's voice, tense but clear, came to her as the reverberating thunder hushed. Joy surged through her, and she sped to his side, as lightning flamed, and stood staring wide-eyed at the crumpled thing on the muddy ground.

Lee's arms cradled her to his heart, and his lips claimed hers. Rain lashed them, thunder gripped the world and shook it savagely, but June neither knew nor cared.

Finally she leaned back in his arms, eyes glowing softly. "Oh, Lee!"

"It's all right, hon. Everything's going to be all right," he murmured. "That hombre shot himself. He was dragging that hideout gun from a shoulder holster when I grabbed his arm. It went off before he got it out." He glanced at the dead thing on the ground. "He got what was coming to him. Honey, we've got to get out of here."

He caught her hand, and they sped into the sheltering barn.

"Lee, you've got to go," she cried, "before they find you! There's three more of those killers here!"

His arm slid around her waist. "I'm taking you to Terry Shane's ranch, June. Gregory's up to some deviltry—he didn't plant those killers on your ranch for nothing. Looks like he's after you. It's going to be a mean ride, through this storm, but we'll make it. You'll be safe at the TS."

"LEE, I can't—I won't!" She caught his arm in both hands. "I'm going to ride up to Hashknife Pass and bring Tex Shipley and his men back here. I'm going to drive all those killers off this ranch. I can't run off and leave Dad—"

"But you can't ride to that pass now," he broke in, his voice almost blotted out by crashing thunder. "Not

in this storm. It's a regular cloudburst. Every canyon and arroyo is a roaring torrent. You know that."

Then lightning flared, and he stared at her with widening eyes. Her wet hair tumbling around her shoulders, her eyes glowing, her lips parted a little, she was like some vibrant, wild spirit of the storm. There was no fear in her eyes; the bright courage of the West burned there.

"I'm going." She said it quietly.

"Listen, honey! Just a minute!" He caught her arm as she was groping for her riding gear. "There's just three of them polecats in the bunkhouse?"

"Yes. And two or three of our own riders."

He waited until the crashing thunder died away. Then: "Those killers don't know I'm here. I'll just drop down on them, take their guns before they know what's happening, and run them off."

June drew a deep breath, brushed back locks of wet, wayward hair. The gun Stroud had plucked from her gleamed in the hay as lightning flickered, and she darted to the weapon and caught it up.

"I'm going with you, Lee," she cried.

The Range Wind's Message

THE protest leaping to Lee Hammond's lips hushed as the lightning gave him a glimpse of her face. It was hopeless to argue with this girl—she *would* go with him—and there was no time to waste. Any moment some cowboy might step out from the bunkhouse and discover Stroud's body.

"All right, June," he agreed reluctantly. "I sure wish you wouldn't, but I reckon you will. Seems like you're the boss. Don't take any chances with them polecats, June. Watch your own men, as well as the others. Maybe Gregory's been bribing them. You never know what that hombre's up to.

The storm seemed to charge in new fury as they quitted the stable. It swallowed them in a pit of blackness, beating savagely with wind and rain. Ahead of them a lone lighted window in the bunkhouse gleamed wanly.

June's hand caught Lee's as thunder crashed low over them, and she pressed against him. His clasp tightened on her fingers, but he checked the impulse to sweep her to his breast. They drew nearer the glowing window and paused an instant on a low ledge, as the wind almost swept them from their feet.

Suddenly June's fingers tightened convulsively on his. "Listen! Do you hear it?" she cried through the rush of wind. "Listen!"

And then he heard it—a low drumming sound, borne on the wings of the west wind, pulsing through the storm. It was drawing nearer, steadily growing stronger and more distinct.

"Horses! Coming fast!" Lee spun about and stared through the blackness, strained his eyes as sheeting flame opened the leaden sky. Then all was black again, and thunder blotted out all sound. It passed, and again came that steady drum of galloping hoofs.

Lee bent his head until his face touched her wet hair under the brim of her dripping hat. "They're coming from the canyon."

"They're not our riders," June said breathlessly. "None of our men are up there. They're nesters! They're raiding the Double Hammer! And Dad's all alone—and sick!"

She darted for the house.

LEE HAMMOND raced around the corner of the stable to his tethered horse, jerked his rifle from the saddle and sped to the shelter of the watering trough. Rifle ready, he crouched, watching tensely.

Thunder rocked the ranch house as June stormed into the dimly lighted hall. On the wall, below a mounted deer head, hung her carbine. She snatched it down, made sure the magazine was loaded, then ran into the living room.

Old Brad Deering reared back in his big chair with a startled grunt as the girl raced in. "What the blistering blue—!"

Wild yells burst suddenly on the night, and bullets thudded against the shuddering walls. Deering leaped up with a roar.

"It's the nesters! They're raiding us!" June cried, as she jerked open a drawer of the sideboard and caught up a box of cartridges. The keen, ringing bark of a rifle, coming from near the house, cut through the yells of the attackers.

"Lee's out there fighting for us!" She flung it at him. "Do you hear? He's fighting for us! And you've got men down on his ranch hunting him. You've sent away every man we could trust. I told you that Gregory was—"

She broke off with a little gasp, leaping sidewise as a bullet whined spitefully above her head. Darting to the table, she extinguished the lamp, sped into the dark kitchen. Lead shattered a window, drummed on roof and walls. Lightning flamed like a monstrous torch. June raced across the room, bending low.

Crashing thunder muffled the dull roar of rifle and revolver fire, drowned the savage, shouting voices. Then guns were again voicing their song of hate.

WORMING her way to the shattered window, June raised up warily behind the sheltering angle of the ledge, sighted carefully, and flung two quick shots at galloping, shadowy forms.

The hoarse, agonized scream of a stricken man rang across the night. June dropped down, twisting around as a deafening roar shook the room. The agony of his rheumatism forgotten, old Brad Deering was crouched down by the doorframe, flame and smoke jetting from his heavy rifle.

The girl raised up as the lightning came, flinching back as a windowpane crashed and showered the floor with tinkling glass. A bullet crashed among pans and cooking utensils. The ranch yard was full of yelling, shooting, galloping men.

Then blackness charged in and thunder blotted out howls and shots and the roar of rain. Again came a gush of flame from behind the watering trough. Something whined close to the girl's face, even as she dropped back to the floor.

Slipping fresh shells into the magazine, June raised her rifle, waiting for the lightning to show the enemy. Her heart was pounding; her mouth felt dry and salty. Then the blackness opened again, and in the lightning glare she saw a knot of horsemen charging the watering trough behind which Lee Hammond fought.

Her carbine blazed, but the charge swept past her and around a corner of the house, shielding the riders from her shots. Breathlessly she watched the jets of crimson fire lashing out from the trough. The attackers were not firing on the house now. They were centering all their hate on that lone fighter, on the splendid man who was battling for her. A little prayer broke from the girl's lips. Then her heart leaped in a spasm of fear. The lashing bursts of flame from Lee's gun had ceased. A hoarse voice yelled gloatingly!

SHE leaped up, sped past startled old Brad Deering and out into the driving wind and rain, hardly hearing her father's shout to come back. Hissing lightning met her. She flung up her rifle, fired blindly at the horsemen clustering around the water

trough, gasping a little sobbing cry as they scattered with startled yells. . . .

She reached the trough, flung herself on her knees beside that crumpled form, and fired wildly, blindly, at the shadowy figures a few yards beyond. She fired until the hammer clicked on the last empty shell, fighting like a tigress for the man she loved.

Lee—she had to defend him, had to save him!

She dropped the useless rifle, and whipped out her six-shooter. Then it came to her that the attackers were scattering, that other riders were charging them with flaming guns and cowboy yells.

Help had come!

A little prayer of thanksgiving broke from June's lips. "Please!" she whispered. "Don't let it be too late for Lee! Keep him safe—I love him so!"

The cry came from her heart.

Her trembling hands touched Lee's wet face, and a little broken cry came from her. At first she was sure he was dead. Then, ripping, tearing away the folds of his slicker and shirt, she felt his heart beating under her hand.

Lightning flared, and the girl saw the grazed wound on his temple. She bent closer, and a little sobbing cry of thanksgiving broke from her lips. Color was creeping into his pale, wet face—he was stirring.

"June!" It was all he could say in that moment when the nearness of her filled him with joy and his heart throbbed against her.

June kissed him swiftly, her arms tightening around him. . . .

VOICES came to them through the gloom. Bobbing lanterns were dancing like monstrous fireflies in the blackness, thrusting back the inky, rain-drenched night, coming nearer. June and Lee scrambled up, their hands clinging, their hearts exultant with victory.

"—mighty lucky you're not cleaned out, Brad Deering!" Rusty Hayne's voice carried to them, as the wind momentarily lulled. "Yeah, we found the coyote. *Sure* 'twas Gregory! Somebody knocked him off his horse with a chunk of lead, and he was trampled to nothing much when we found him. Yeah, he admitted before he passed out that he planned to settle you and your girl. Figgered he had to do it right away, seeing as this rain spoiled the range war he'd stewed up to ruin you and the rest of us. If it wasn't for old Zeke Parsons and those other nesters sending us word, Brad—"

The wind awoke with a roar; thunder rolled. Then old Rusty's voice came again.

"Sure. 'Twas Lee Hammond that was slamming lead at 'em from behind the watering trough. Your own men in the bunkhouse were helping those killers Gregory planted on your payroll. Sure enough 'twas Lee. Fighting for you, you old pelican, 'cause he loves your girl! Yeah, and if it wasn't for that boy, those jaspers would have wiped you out before we got here. Who the hell else would fight for your outfit, Brad Deering? I'm only praying nothing's happened to him—nor to that grand girl of yours!"

June sighed, and leaned close to Lee, relaxing, a thrill running through her.

"Lee!" she whispered. "Lee! It's all over—the fighting, the killing, the terrible hatred that was destroying everything on the range. Lee—is it true? Is it really true?"

"You bet, June!"

Lee's arm went around June, held her close. "We've won, honey, we've won!" he cried, and his eager lips met hers.

Maverick Homesteader

By Robert E. Mahaffay

Hard knocks, heartbreaking work—she could take them all gallantly, chin up—until a stray cowboy's laughter broke through her armor

"That's what you'd like, isn't it?" she flashed at him. "To get me out of here!"

ABOUT as violently as she would have slammed a rope's end across the nose of a wild and threatening steer, Helen Vinal whacked at the cobweb with a broom. The cobweb, high in the cabin's corner, behind the stove, was pretty well demolished. But the broom's sweep knocked over a can of salt on the shelf, cracked into the stovepipe, and

upset a pot of beans which had been harmlessly stewing.

Helen said, "Oh, hang it!"

Smoke puffed foggily from the crooked and breached pipe, mingling with the smell of beans scorching on the hot stove top.

From the direction of the bed Helen could hear her father coughing but not saying anything. Words never helped much, he had found. His silence told her, though, that he was disappointed again. Ellery Vinal never had given up the notion that his daughter ought to be gentle and ladylike and deftly capable of bringing order out of a household's riot.

It was a mighty slim hope, Helen told herself, and hit the stovepipe another whack with the broom, on the off chance that it would miraculously straighten. It didn't. The pipe broke loose altogether, and smoke poured from the vent in a flood.

Through smoke tears Helen surveyed the damage as she might have surveyed a bronc that had pitched her out of the saddle and thought he was going to do it again.

Housework shared her heartiest detestation with coyotes, rattlesnakes and beetles which dropped from the ceiling into cooking pots. More to pacify her father than anything else, she had consented to whisk over the cabin before leaving, though she would have been about as happy plastering it with blue mud. And now—confusion and wreckage. And she was already late.

Nevertheless, she went at the job with a stubborn ferocity, coughing and gagging on the smoke, blistering her fingers on the hot stovepipe as she jammed it back into place, carefully scraping together the precious salt, scooping up the spilled beans.

That done, she opened the door and let the brisk mountain air sweep through the cabin. Looking around for jacket and riding boots, she began to whistle as if quite carefree.

Her father, she knew, was regarding her as if she were a likely looking pony which through sheer fractiousness has rejected the saddle and shows a tornado-like intention of persisting in rebellion.

Likely looking! That was the fountain of her trouble. If she were awkward and raw-boned and ugly, no one would give a second thought to her demand that she be judged by a man's standards. It would be accepted, as a matter of fact, with relief. She could ride like a man and rope like a man, and she wanted nothing whatever to do with feminine gentleness.

SHE was, however, neither ugly nor raw-boned nor awkward. The softness of her hair, which was a filmy mass of golden and delicately-spun threads, was a source of disgust to her. And her face! She knotted it in a scowl, and still could not destroy its attractivenes. Instead of being narrow and determined, her eyes were a warm brown, large and appealing; her lips were deliciously curved and full of color. And her slim body, in spite of its muscular ability, was modeled like a statue and possessed of a grace which no movement she might attempt could wholly conceal.

It was all very discouraging. Her father, of course, didn't understand. He expected her, because she looked like a young lady, to be one. She asked only to be allowed to back herself against any man, at a man's work. Here a certain tightness crept into her throat. And a vague and troubling doubt took hold of her. With her father lying helpless from a wrenched back a fall from a horse had given him, there was a man's work to be done. And no one but herself to do it.

As she pulled on the boots, her brown eyes swept the little cabin. It was of rough log construction, boasting only one room, as crude and unlovely as most homestead cabins. It

was a far cry from what she had been accustomed to, but she shook off that thought. It was a beginning, a second beginning, after years of trouble and failure.

Her gun was hanging from a nail behind the curtain partitioning off the corner of the cabin that was hers. She came out buckling it on.

From the bed Ellery Vinal voiced his protest at once. "Doggone it, Helen, it isn't safe for you to go packin' that iron."

"It isn't safe not to," she told him. "Look what happened to you."

"Nobody shot Blue," Ellery Vinal objected with a weak show of spirit. "I've told you that. He cut his knee on a rock when he fell."

"Nonsense, Dad." Helen almost stamped her foot at her father's blind trust and refusal to believe the worst when he ran up against it. "A bullet broke Blue's knee. That's why he fell. And Laird Pomeroy or one of his men did it. You know that as well as I do. He thought that would stop us. Well, it isn't going to."

Ellery Vinal stared at his daughter, shaking his head. He was older in spirit than he was in years, gray-haired and gaunt, stubborn of chin, but with eyes that were soft and kindly and trusting. Because of that trust in the men he dealt with, a fortune had slipped through his fingers. Because of the stubbornness in his jaw, he was trying to start over again.

"If you'll only hold off a little," he begged, "I'll be on my feet again, an' then—"

Helen bent down and kissed him gently. "There'll be snow in another month, and then it'll be too late. There isn't a thing to worry about, really. I guess I was wrong about Blue being shot." She kissed her father again and went out.

RIDING north on a rangy buckskin gelding that a good many men would have mounted with reluctance, Helen Vinal reflected that her last words to her father had been pure falsehood. There was plenty to worry about, and she wasn't wrong about Blue having been shot.

Around her the hills clambered upward, wild and savage, heaped into rugged conformations, gashed and torn by angling canyons. The nature of the country, it seemed to her, was an accurate reflection of the fierce and desperate purposes of the men in it.

At first glance it appeared too broken for cattle. Yet nestling here and there, hidden by thick pine screens, were valleys, rich in mountain bluestem, and clear cool streams. Yonder, over Sawtooth Ridge, which ran raggedly across the skyline, lay Laird Pomeroy's big Frying-Pan outfit which in summer grazed high on the ridge.

Until a year ago, Ellery Vinal had owned it. Hard times had thrown him into bankruptcy, and Pomeroy had risen out of a scraggly, homesteading start to buy it. The homesteading, in Pomeroy's case, had been a blind. He had rustled Frying-Pan beef, broken the outfit, and bought it up with Frying-Pan money.

Wiped out, Ellery Vinal had begun again on a homestead across Sawtooth Ridge. It had seemed wise. In the lush days of the Frying-Pan, a handful of cattle each year had drifted across the ridge and down into the rough country. Efforts to recover them had never been thorough because of the cost. Unbranded for the most part, they roamed the on-end hogbacks and brushy canyons like so many untamed deer.

Snaking them out was a grueling, horse-and-man-killing job, but it meant money for a homesteader who had none. The Frying-Pan bill of sale had covered land and specified stock. Those ridge-roaming mavericks belonged to anyone who could get a loop on them and keep it there.

Helen looked up toward the ridge, considering Laird Pomeroy beyond it, and angry fire grew in her brown eyes. Homesteaders had never been welcomed in the Sawtooth Ridge country, though it wasn't until Ellery Vinal had filed that the value of the south ridge became apparent.

Laird Pomeroy had reenforced the old edict with guns and men. Warily alert, he understood that if the move grew, homesteaders would creep down the north side of the ridge and chop the vast Frying-Pan holdings to pieces.

Pomeroy had more land than he needed, but not more than he hoped to need. So he was fighting the Vinals, thinking to break the spearhead of the army of ragged families, waiting to see if Ellery Vinal would make it stick—or lose his life.

THE morning sun was pulling itself above the rim of hills and beginning to chip away at the early chill. The buckskin's ears pricked up abruptly. To Helen came the crashing of a horse in thick brush, the sound dulled by the intervening hogback which rose on her left.

That would be Tom Carbley, she decided. She was late, and he hadn't waited for her. He had pried one of the wild ones out of its retreat and might need help with it.

She turned the buckskin up the brush-stubbled, rock-patched slope, untying her rope and shaking out the coils. From the summit she got a view of other lesser ridges stretching away in a tangled jumble.

There was a blur of movement a quarter-mile to the north. A tawny shape had bolted at an angle across the next hogback and vanished into the further draw. Twenty yards behind, a black-hatted rider tore from the concealment of a wind-blasted clump of pines, whipped across the rim and dropped out of sight.

From the pace, Helen judged that the chase had been a long one and that Carbley's mount was tiring. Quick riding might cut the brute off and put Carbley in a position for a throw.

She spurred the buckskin instantly. He rocketed off the rim, went slamming down through the brushy bottom and up the next slope in great bucking leaps. On the flat top the buckskin checked his rush, hung there quivering.

The draw below was rough with tumbled boulders. The slope down to it was all but impassable—a series of crumbling shelves and slanting ledges. Precipitous, treacherous, a fall there would have ugly consequences.

The cow, having sought the terrain deliberately, was racing down the rugged bottom like a rabbit. The pursuing pony, weary and less surefooted, was falling behind.

A minute more and the cow would be lost, along with a morning's work. No time to pick an alternate route down. At best it would be a close thing.

Helen's steel roweled the buckskin. He hesitated, but he took the six-foot jump to the shelf below, slid down a cataract of loose rubble, crouched like a cat, and jumped again. Helen had only a glimpse of Carbley's face jerking up to stare at her. She heard his shout of warning, but didn't stop. Her heart was hammering desperately, her eyes were glued to the perils underfoot.

The buckskin stumbled to his knees, grunted with fright. She lifted him with a grip as steady as a man's. He went skittering along a narrowing ledge, jumped once more and was on solid footing.

Almost upon her, the bolting cow dug four hoofs into the dirt, swerved, made as if to turn back. It was time enough for Carbley to come up. His loop snaked out, his trained pony settled back and the maverick went sprawling head over heels. Carbley

was out of the saddle in a flash, running down the rope, snubbing cords in his hand.

The cow's thrashing hind feet captured and trussed, Carbley's black hat lifted and he looked over his shoulder. "That was the damnedest fool piece of riding I ever saw," he said.

Helen Vinal stared, shocked into momentary silence. Not because Tom Carbley would never have made so flat and unflattering a statement to her, but because this man wasn't Tom Carbley.

The floppy black hat was the same, and the faded blue denim jumper was the same, but he wasn't Tom Carbley.

Blacky

"What did you plan to do when you got here?" he demanded, and she could see he was laughing at her, though his face was sober. "Where's your rope?"

Her rope, she became aware now, had got away from her during that whirlwind rush down the slope. Color burned into her cheeks.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" she exclaimed hotly.

"Well, now, Clarke's the last name," he told her. "Blacky for short, my first name bein' Whittacker, which is some clumsy. I'm homesteading over yonder a piece, an' picking up what side money I can this way."

"By stealing our cows!" she challenged.

"*Your* cows?" His eyebrows lifted. "That's long-range brandin', ma'am. There's not a mark on this one, that I can see. And she sure didn't act as if she'd ever seen a man and a horse before."

His quiet and her own embarrassment infuriated her. She observed but was further irritated by the level keenness of his blue eyes, the suggestion of amusement about his straight, well-built mouth. His nose, too, was shapely; a little large, perhaps, but well balanced against the slope of his cheeks and the ridges of his cheekbones.

"You'd ought to quit ridin' like that," he suggested. "Next time you'd likely—"

"I'll ride anywhere I please, and any way I please."

"That path you took," he pointed out imperturbably, "wasn't exactly built for a lady. And, right now"—the hint of laughed faded from his eyes—"it isn't exactly safe for a lady to be ridin' anywhere in this country."

"Do you mean that," she flung at him, "as a threat?"

"Gosh, no! I was just—"

"I suppose you mean that what happened to Dad might happen to me," she cried furiously. "Well, I'll give you a warning, too. I can take care of myself. There aren't any homesteaders on this side of the ridge except Dad and Tom Carbley!"

"There's me."

Helen shook her head at him in wrathful denial. "There's only one person who would be interested in having a man planted on this side. Laird Pomeroy!"

"You know, ma'am," he told her gently, "here you are insultin' me, and you haven't even told me your name yet!"

"It doesn't matter!"

"Golly, now, it sure does to *me!*" He had finished looping the fore-legs, and while enduring Helen Vinal's blazing scrutiny, was sitting on the cow's head. Unabashed, he regarded her with a grin. "If you don't mind my sayin' so, you cheat folks out of an awful lot, wearin' a hat like that. Shades your eyes so's a man has to look twice to find out what's really there. An' if you were to wear somethin' besides that jacket, which is kind of like hidin' a flower under a blanket, and a skirt, maybe, instead of—"

Very nearly sobbing with helpless anger, Helen Vinal jabbed spurs into the buckskin's flanks. The startled animal shot ahead, evading Blacky Clarke by inches.

Though Helen didn't look back, she heard him whistle. Whether in amusement or dismay or anger, she couldn't tell. Her rope was back up on that steep pitch down from the hogback. She left it there, riding hard up the draw until she was certain she was out of sight.

HELEN was still boiling when she reached Carbley's camp. It lay between two timbered hills which sharpened narrowly into a deep V, forming a blind canyon. Fenced at the mouth, the canyon served admirably as a temporary corral.

Carbley was prying a stone from the hoof of one of the picketed horses, and examining the frog for damage, when she rode up. He dropped the foot and his head swung toward the canyon and back again indecisively.

Something in his manner jerked Helen's attention up sharply. Tom Carbley had been the Frying-Pan's foreman when it went under. He could have remained with the outfit, but had, Helen guessed, chosen to throw his lot with the Vinals because of her.

She had allowed herself to tinker with the notion of what would happen if she encouraged him. The prospect hadn't seized her and lifted her, and she had let it pass—with warm scorn, she had told herself, yet, secretly, with a trace of wistfulness.

Tom Carbley was attractive enough—a tall and powerful man in his early thirties, with a crisp way of talking and a cocky lift to his head. His face, regular of feature and at first glance stolid, was deceiving. He was as alert as a wolf, and it was as hard to pin down his thoughts as it was to get a wolf into a trap.

Helen hurried her glance toward the canyon mouth. From her angling position she could see only one cow. The animal was lying on its side, head thrown back.

Apprehension clutched at her throat, and she knew her voice wasn't steady. "Tom, they didn't—"

He nodded grimly. "Shot all six of 'em. Last night."

"Who?"

"Can't say for sure," Carbley snapped. "Long about midnight I heard a stirrin' off in the brush. Went down to have a look, an' while I was out of gunshot somebody opened up on 'em from the rim. There was moon enough for him to see by."

Helen stared at him, her face going white. It meant lost money and lost time. But what was subtly more cruel, it made the hurt her father had sustained seem futile.

Carbley's voice was a harsh rumble. "There's a grub-liner holed up two-three miles west of here. He's runnin' this maverick stuff same as we are. Claims he's homesteadin' a piece over there. Me, I think he's lyin'. My hunch is he's drawin' Pomeroy's wages, an' that stunt last night—"

"He didn't!" Helen cried sharply. "He couldn't have been the man!"

Why she said that, she couldn't have told. She heard the words with a sensation of shocked surprise, as if someone else had spoken them. She

was aware of the surge and pound of the blood in her temples, and of Tom Carbley's intent, penetrating inspection.

He was saying in an unhurried way, "What makes you so sure?"

She had control of herself by then, and back again was her strong self-assurance, which had slipped away.

"I met him on the way up here," she said calmly. "It doesn't seem likely, that's all. Have you an extra rope? I forgot mine."

He shrugged, almost sullenly. "What's the sense in keepin' this up? Pomeroy can butcher our stuff fast as we gather it."

She swung to face him fully. "He won't butcher any more without looking into a gun-barrel when he tries it!"

A WEEK went by, almost in the wink of an eye. A week of hard, reckless riding, of muscle-grinding work into which Helen Vinal threw herself with a relentless fury.

The bunch of stringy wild stuff grew in the canyon. A month of good grazing would make them marketable. But though they were adding bit by bit to the goal she had set, they brought her no satisfaction.

She had thought that unwavering absorption in the task would strip from her mind any memory of those level blue eyes which had studied her, amusedly and with warm interest. It angered her a little because the recollection remained; her chin would lift and her eyes blaze, but the memory lingered, like the echo of a chuckle of friendly mockery.

And it frightened her, too, to think that words of defense had sprung unwanted and unbidden to her lips when Carbley had accused Clarke of butchering their little herd. She was willing to believe that this Blacky Clarke had done it—and yet something within her had leaped to defend him. Why?

It was just growing dusk when Blacky Clarke drifted up to the camp at the mouth of the canyon. Tom Carbley, who had accepted the new arrangement only after sullen argument, had gone down to the cabin and Ellery Vinal. Helen, bone-weary from the day's work, was huddled close to the little fire, arms clasped about her drawn-up knees.

She hadn't thought a horse could approach so soundlessly. He was within a dozen paces of her, a dark shape looming high in the saddle. She knew instantly who it was; in spite of her attempt at control, she started, and her heart began to pound.

"Didn't mean to scare you, ma'am." She hadn't noticed before how deep and full his voice was. "I been meanin' before this to bring your rope over to you."

"You needn't have bothered," Helen told him curtly. "I brought an old one by mistake that morning. I was going to throw it away, anyhow."

"Well—as a matter of fact, the rope was just an excuse." He was drawling the words a little awkwardly. There was a vibrant ring to them, instead of that undertone of amusement. "I—I wanted to see you again, ma'am."

Helen stood up quickly, trying to cover the thumping murmur of her heartbeats. "You needn't have bothered about that, either," she said. "I don't want to see you."

His mount sidled closer, and the crimson firelight touched up his cheekbones, his eyes that were steadily regarding her. "All right," he agreed slowly, "if that's the way you want it. But just the same, let me ask you something. This fight is going to break soon. These hills won't be any place for you. Why not leave until it's been settled?"

"That's what you'd like, isn't it?" she flashed at him. "To get me out of here! You know if we quit now, we'd never come back!"

"No," he said, "it isn't what I'd

like, but it's the best thing. There's going to be trouble, and I'd hate to see you in the middle of it."

"So you think I'm quite helpless?" she cried angrily.

"I'd do most anything to keep you from gettin' hurt," he answered simply.

THE power that his voice wielded over her amazed and shook Helen Vinal; it was like a current of water, softly tugging her along, calmly and relentlessly overbearing her strength.

Her weariness and her desperate desire to avoid surrender made her burst out, "I don't want your help. I don't need it!"

For a moment she struggled helplessly against his silence. It was a wall that made her feel childish and futile and weak. She knew that she was trembling, thought that he was going to laugh at her for it, and in an agony of humiliation snatched her gun from its holster. Its coldness and weight, and the reassurance of having something to grip, steadied her.

"If Tom Carbley had been here," she said icily, "you would have been afraid to come. It's just as dangerous for you when I'm alone. I can shoot. I *will*, if you don't leave!"

The firelight showed that Clarke's dark brows were knotted, and Helen heard him push breath out of his lungs, as if reluctantly.

"Ma'am," he said softly, "it was Tom Carbley shot that batch of cows you had in the canyon."

Taken completely by surprise, Helen stared at him.

"I don't believe it!" she said.

"Pomeroy hired him to follow you over here—to help drive you and your father out." He leaned forward in the saddle, and his voice grew urgent. "It was Carbley who shot your father's horse. They aim to finish the job tomorrow night or the night after. That means burning your cabin. There'll be guns waiting for your father if he tries to get out—if he *can* get out."

There was rebellion in Helen Vinal, strongly goading her. "How does it happen," she demanded, "that you know so much about what Pomeroy intends to do?"

"I happen to know. That's enough, isn't it? You still have a chance to clear out of this. Take it. Go down to the cabin in the morning, get your father some place where he'll be safe."

The blood was pounding in mad excitement through Helen's veins; the same wildness was whipping her nerves. She fought for control, fought to keep the telltale huskiness out of her voice.

"I think you're lying." Her hand with the gun was very steady now. "I warned you once. Get out!"

"Ma'am," Clarke said with quiet stubbornness, "if there's anything I can do to make you believe—"

"There isn't. Are you going to leave?"

It would have taken very little to make her finger press the trigger. Both of them realized that. Blacky Clarke dropped his head in a token of surrender.

Helen watched his retreating figure until the darkness had wholly blotted it out. The sound of his mount's hoofs droned into a whisper, and then there was no sound at all save the sly rustle of the wind among pine branches.

She had won a victory—and yet it was queerly without warmth or the power to thrill her. She dropped to her knees by the fire, sobs she was unable to check rising in her throat. . . .

WHEN Carbley rode into camp shortly after daybreak, she told him, with a certain defiance, what had happened the night before. He listened without a word, his face as stolid and unreadable as ever.

"So what do you think?" he asked, when she had finished.

"I think he was lying." Then she added as casually as she could, "For a night or two, though, I'm going to stay in the cabin with Dad." She watched Carbley's eyes, her breathing stopped. If an attack on the cabin was planned, Carbley wouldn't want her in it.

He nodded thoughtfully. "A good idea. Ellery's been some worried. I'll meet you here a little before dark an' take over." He swung his gaze toward the canyon mouth. "My hunch is that that Clarke jasper wants to pull us both away from here, so he can wipe out the rest of the stuff we've gathered. He worked that once, but I'll be damned if he will again!"

So, Helen thought, that was that! She had asked for proof and had got it. It didn't please her. As she rode the twisting, brush-cluttered draws of the south ridge that morning, she knew she had lost something. The compelling urgency which had driven her through reckless days and weary nights was gone. Where her heart should have been, there was only an aching emptiness.

Her throat would go dry, her eyes would cloud with tears she hated, when she thought of the level glance from blue eyes which moved her so deeply. She remembered with a sickening sense of defeat the words: "I'd do most anything to keep you from gettin' hurt."

She loved Blacky Clarke.

It was there and she couldn't shake it. Her old feeling of rebellion struggled against it, only to be overwhelmed. She had won, but wrapped in the victory was ghastly defeat.

The day dragged to its close, and as if it were an ominous portent, it was the first day of complete failure. Ordinarily it would have been a matter of bitter disappointment. Now she felt nothing. Even back at the camp, waiting for Tom Carbley, the sight of cattle corralled in the canyon failed to move her.

Weary and uncaring, she watched the sun burrow into the tumbled western hills. Even her impatience at Carbley's delay was dull, not even disturbing. What she wanted most, now, was to see her father.

She felt that if she could kneel down by her father's side, if she could whisper to him the dark story of the man she loved, Ellery Vinal, somehow, would find the words to soothe her. . . .

SHE stood up suddenly, shocked to attention. The gathering dusk had been swept away by the darkness of full night. Overhead, stars were glistening icily; the cold yellow rays of the moon were forming swaying shadows under the pines.

And Tom Carbley hadn't returned!

She was groping for the meaning of that when a drum-roll of shots came with hollow faintness across the hogbacks to the west. They stiffened her, held her breathless. How far off the shooting was, the nature of the country made it hard to determine. Half a dozen scattered explosions followed the first volley.

Helen hesitated, in an agony of apprehension. Did it mean that Tom Carbley, returning, had encountered Blacky Clarke and pitched into a fight with him?

Frantically she began to take up the loosened saddle cinch. If it was Carbley, if he needed help—

But once in the saddle, wheeling toward the west, she reined in, gripped by her rising doubt. Could it be that this was only the prelude to the savage raid on the cabin Clarke had predicted? If so, her father, helpless, unable to defend himself, needed her more!

The beat of rocketing hoofs whispered through the night. The volume swelled, then a rider was swinging at a mad run out of the pine shadows to the west.

There was no mistaking him. It was

Blacky Clarke, hatless, low-bent in the saddle. That meant Tom Carbley had lost. Helen wheeled her pony, sent him leaping with a stab of her spurs.

One vital, flaming purpose wholly possessed her—to reach the cabin and her father before Blacky Clarke and his raiders could. She swung into the south trail at a mad gallop, a hundred yards in the lead. Behind her a shout lifted faintly. She gave no heed to it.

The night wind, cool though it was, seemed to be a hot blast against Helen's face. The drumming thunder of her own hoofbeats climbed around her, drowning out those pursuing. Jutting ledges of rock loomed like dark monsters, rushed at her and vanished. On both sides, the ragged outline of the lofty pines marched against the stars.

With a mile gone, Helen darted a glance over her shoulder. A feeling that was more reckless fury than fear burned in her. Blacky Clarke had gained. He was a swerving, racing shape almost at her heels.

That reckless, rebel quality was like wine in Helen's blood. She turned her mount, sent him plunging off the trail. Again she heard that shout of warning. Brush crashed like a fusillade; her pony smashed through, spilled down a rocky slope and lunged on.

Something between a sob and a laugh was bursting in Helen's throat. This would be the last of her wild, free escapades. She knew that. She would win by it—or lose everything. . . .

A STRAIGHT route across the the hills was minutes shorter than the trail. She had ridden it by daylight, but never at night. She knew how perilous, how treacherous, it could be. That was why she took it. She was gambling desperately that she could do it, and Blacky Clarke could not.

It was an insane ride—that slamming rush across country pitted with evil traps, greedy to wreak vengeful destruction. It was a blind clawing up sliding inclines, a battle with thickets that grappled with gnarled fingers, a broken series of breathtaking spurts where there was open country. And the night huddled in the hollows, lay thick where the wan light of the moon could not reach.

The pony's lungs were laboring like a bellows. He buck-jumped up a slope, pitched across and down, lurching within inches of a pine's black trunk.

Helen shot a glance behind her, and fierce exultation leaped in her heart. She was close, close to the cabin now, close to her father. And she had set a pace that Blacky Clarke could not or would not follow!

She raked hard with her spurs. Her head was swimming with the pounding she had taken and with her sense of triumph. The blackness of the night was bearing down like a smothering weight. Something was happening to her—she didn't understand just what. She groped for the saddlehorn with a rapid desperate gesture, as if she were in a dream. It wasn't there. The pony seemed to be dropping from under her.

Then the whole world exploded in a shattering blast. The dark earth had lashed up at her with stunning force. Through it, penetrating the shock and the pain, came a wretched, sickening voice whispering that she had met defeat.

Time passed, but she didn't realize it. That voice had changed, grown deep and soft. And it was whispering, "You little fool—you crazy, darling little fool!"

She felt the warmth and softness of lips pressed against her own. Strong arms were supporting her easily. Blacky Clarke's arms, for the voice was his. His closeness, she thought, should fill her with hatred,

with stubborn anger. Yet it didn't, for happiness was flooding through her, a great, swelling happiness which was stronger than her rebellion, stronger than her own will.

The moment dissolved in the memory of her father, helpless at the cabin. She tried to move, and immediately wrenching pain shot through her.

"Your ankle," Blacky Clarke said. "It's broken, I think."

She could see his face in the moonlight. Along one of his cheeks was a dark smear of blood; his eyes were tight and harsh with strain.

She said huskily, "Did Tom Carbley—?"

His head jerked negatively. "I thought Pomeroy's gun-hawks would try for me first, when they came over the ridge, so I waited there. They split up, instead. There were three of 'em at my place. I gunned through. The rest are headin' for your cabin."

"I've got—to get there!" she cried brokenly. She struggled again, and the wave of pain all but drove her into unconsciousness.

His voice came to her gently. "I'll get you there. Easy, now."

Vaguely, she felt him lift her up in his arms.

THE rest of it would always be a blur in Helen Vinal's mind. She was lifted, cradled in Blacky Clarke's arms. That soothed her, she remembered; drove away her fears. Then the cabin was taking shape in the dark, and Blacky Clarke had left her. She would never forget her sickening feeling of loss, of abandonment.

But Blacky Clarke was striding toward the three horsemen wheeling in front of the cabin. Blunt shouts rose; casual shots were fired; one of them had a torch. She recognized the heavy, bearlike figure of Laird Pomeroy and, with no surprise, the wide-shouldered Tom Carbley.

Then Blacky Clarke's voice had ripped at them: "Deputy United States Marshal talkin', Pomeroy. You're under arrest, charged with obstructin' the homestead laws!"

An instant of clamoring silence, then trip-hammer shooting.

She remembered seeing Laird Pomeroy sprawl out of the saddle. Tom Carbley charged the figure half-hidden in the shadows, and was shot from his horse's back before he reached it. The last of the trio whirled his mount and raced into the concealing curtain of the night.

Then Blacky Clarke came limping back to her, and carried her into the cabin. He set and bandaged the ankle, and got a fire going in the stove. While it was heating for coffee and food he drew up a chair and talked in a low murmur to her father.

She got a little of the last of it.

"I've had my fill of lawin'. With what money I could put into the Fryin'-Pan, I reckon the bank would see light. Pomeroy only had a toothhold, you know, an' with him dead, the bank's bound to take over. . . . About the other—I haven't told her yet, but I figured if I asked you—"

Ellery Vinal exclaimed violently, "Don't ask *me*, mister—take your own chances on gettin' your head bit off! I wouldn't any more try to predict—"

Helen Vinal, just then, didn't want —or didn't look as if she wanted— to bite anyone's head off. She wanted very badly to be kissed. Blacky Clarke saw that and got up and, striding across the room, performed the feat in a satisfying, whole-hearted way.

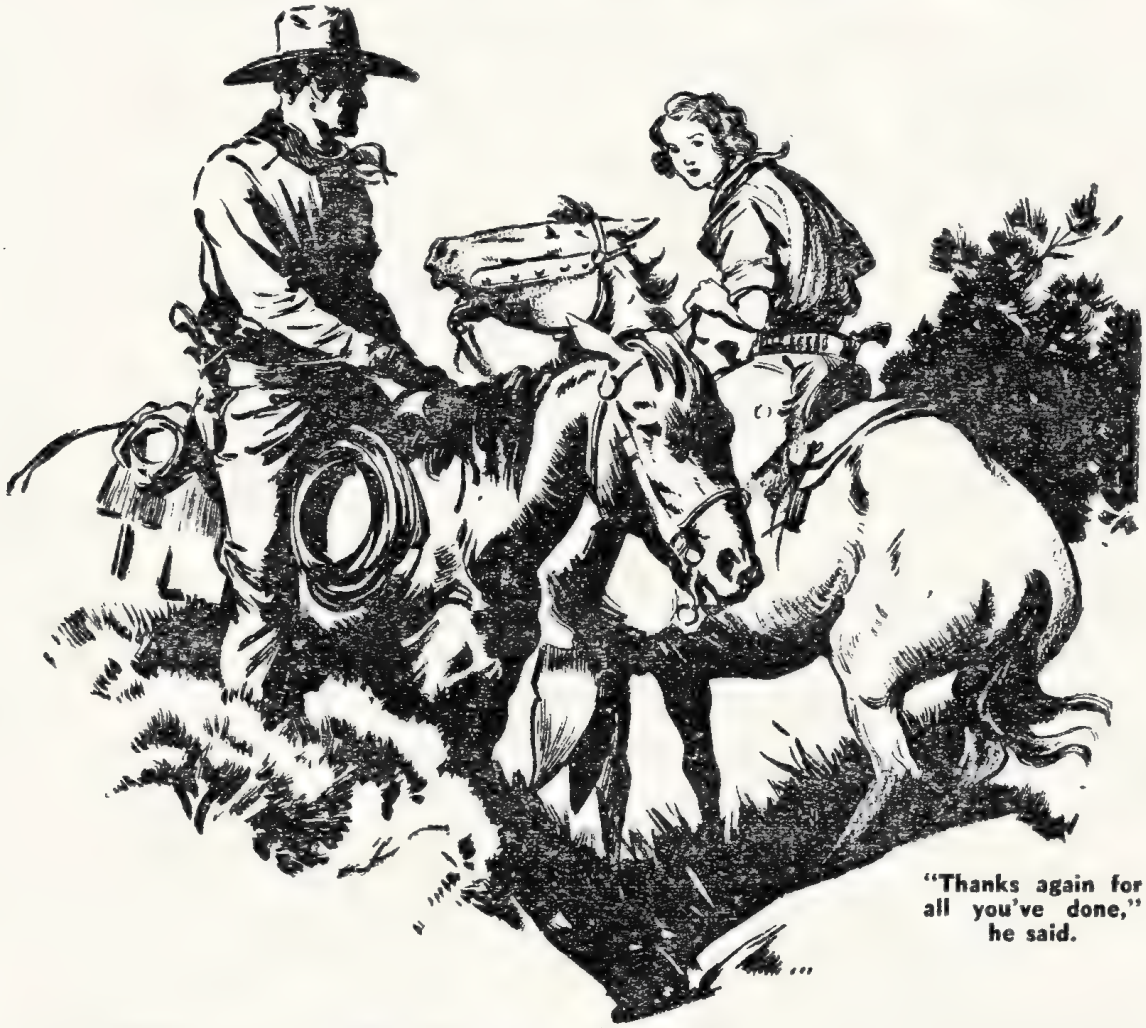
Blacky's arms about her, Blacky's lips on hers—this was a heaven she had never known before.

Past Blacky's shoulder Helen could see her father's face, could see the blank amazement in his eyes. Ellery Vinal *still* didn't understand his daughter!

Rangeland Robin Hood

By BEATRICE JONES

The threat of a cattle and sheep war didn't daunt Sally Long—It was marriage without love that frightened her!



"Thanks again for all you've done," he said.

THEY were a bedraggled little group. The men, lean and windburned, faces grim and strained, stood in a wary little group out in front of the white-covered wagons. Behind the men, back beside the wagons, stood the women. Some of them held whimpering babies in their arms while other children clung to their skirts.

All eyes were turned toward Cheb Davis. Even the children stopped crying as he began to talk. Sally Long turned uneasy eyes on Cheb. He was big and sleek and well-fed looking beside the starved looking little group of nesters.

She began to be sorry she had let Cheb persuade her to come here. After all, her spread was so big. There was room for these people—and she couldn't believe that they

were responsible, as Cheb thought, for her cattle losses. They just didn't look like rustlers.

"We're givin' you fair warnin', Miss Long and me," Cheb was saying to the silent group of men. "We don't want no trouble, but if you don't get off Miss Long's spread by tomorrow noon—"

One of the men in the grim-faced little group stepped resolutely forward, stood close beside Cheb Davis' horse. There was something desperate in his eyes and voice as he broke in.

"But we aim to move on," he said, "jest as soon as our kids get over the mumps and measles. There's an epidemic of it; all of 'em are down. And we figured on staying here in the valley where it's warm till they get over it. It's mighty cold up in them hills right now. We're low on supplies and the kids ain't fitten to stand that cold, sick like they are. Soon as the weather warms up we aim to move on—"

Sally Long looked anxiously at Cheb. There was such sincerity, such desperateness in the voice of this lean nester. Surely, now that he had heard their story, Cheb would—

"We can't help that," Cheb said harshly, breaking into the weary voice. "If we fell for that story you'd keep givin' us others. I know you squatters; give you an inch and you take a mile—"

One of the women sobbed and Sally glanced anxiously at the women and children. She heard one of them wail softly: "If only Slim would come back!" One of the children began to cry wildly and the crying broke into a convulsive, whooping cough.

Sally turned to Cheb. "I think we'd better let them stay, Cheb," she said quickly. "I'm sure—"

"You let me handle this, Sally," he said gruffly, not looking at her. But she could see the impatient frown that slipped over his handsome face.

The man who pleaded the cause of his people turned to Sally now. "Please, ma'am," he said anxiously. "We ain't squatters. We're on our way to the free land the government is giving to settlers out in Arizony. We been wiped out by the Mississippi, up in Missouri, which is why we're not any too well fixed for a trip like this. If you'd jest let us stay here till the warm weather hits the hills. It won't be more'n a month more now. I give you my word, ma'am, we won't hurt yore land, and surely the few beeves it'll take to keep us going for that time won't never be missed from all you got—"

Then Cheb Davis did something that sent a chill of horror through Sally. He lashed out with the quirt hanging from his wrist. The rawhide thong hit the lean nester on the side of the face, cutting a gash that spouted blood.

Sally screamed, "Cheb, don't!" The scream frightened her horse and it began to rear and pitch. She fought to quiet the animal.

Then, suddenly, a voice, vibrant, furious, rose clear above the frightened cries of the women, the wails of the sick children.

"What's going on here?"

Sally managed to get the roan down and turned around again to face the wagon camp. Her blue eyes went wide at sight of the man who had appeared so abruptly in the midst of the discouraged little camp.

He was as lean and weather-beaten as the others. But there was no discouraged slump to his broad shoulders, nor a droop to his head. Instead, with lean hands on narrow hips, head tilted defiantly, blue eyes narrowed angrily, lips tight in a clean-cut young face, he glared up at Cheb Davis.

For a moment Cheb stared at the newcomer in silence. Sally saw him look from the defiant face to the two guns slung loosely at lean hips. She heard one of the women breathe:

"Thank God, Slim Langley came in time!"

Cheb snapped, "Who the hell are you?"

The man had glanced at Sally and for a moment their eyes met, clung. His eyes widened a little and he didn't appear for a moment to have heard Cheb.

Sally felt a little electric shock as that vibrant gaze met hers. She felt the warmth of the color that rose to her face, and her hands began to tremble as they clenched at the reins in front of her. But Slim Langley's face did not soften, and after that one long glance he turned his gaze back to Cheb Davis, answered the angry rancher's insolent question with matching insolence.

"My name is Langley," he said, "and I'm leading these people to Arizona. Who are you?"

Sally saw Cheb's hand reach for the gun at his hip. She screamed, "Don't, Cheb!" and lashed out with her quirt automatically. The leather wound about his wrist and he roared out a curse and jerked his hand away from the gun. His face was dark with anger as he whirled to face her. Then, seeming to remember himself, he made an effort to control his wrath. A weak smile crawled reluctantly over his dark face.

"Listen, Sally," he whined. "You promised to let me handle this—"

"The LML is my spread, Cheb," she snapped. "And I'll be gratified to have you remember that. And I've changed my mind about letting you handle this matter for me. I've decided to let these settlers stay here until they are able to travel."

Out of the corner of her eyes she saw the change that came over the face of Slim Langley, and was startled at the thrill it gave her. His hard mouth softened a little and his blue eyes glittered as they watched her. After that he ignored Cheb, spoke only to her.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, and his voice was no longer hard. "On our honor we promise you won't regret extending us your hospitality."

"If you'll send up to the house," she said hastily, "I think I can give you some medicine that might help the children. And we've more spring vegetables in the garden than we can use ourselves . . ."

Slim Langley swept his big-brimmed hat off, bowed low before her, his dark hair falling softly over his wide forehead as he looked up again.

"That's mighty generous of you, ma'am," he said. "And we're sure grateful . . ."

SHE turned the mare then and rode up the trail after Cheb Davis. The big rancher turned at the sound of her hoofbeats. For the first time in her life, Sally Long admitted to a feeling of impatience at Cheb Davis' smugness. He was, she thought now, pretty overbearing at times.

He seemed to sense her antagonism, and began to apologize hastily. "Reckon I lost my temper, Sally," he said. "But I was thinkin' of yore interest, honey. You know I promised yore dad I'd look out for you, help you to run your outfit, after he died."

"Well, I think you made a mistake this time, Cheb," she said, keeping her eyes on the trail ahead. "I think you're wrong about those nesters. They don't look like cattle thieves to me. Besides, where would they keep the cattle? It's ridiculous. I think it's some of that gang holed up in the hills that's rustling our stock. Soon as my boys finish branding this week I think I'll send them into the hills—"

"I've already done that," he broke in hastily. "I sent half a dozen of my boys in there last week. They claim there ain't a sign of rustlers anywhere in the hills, no sign of any recent camp or cattle trails."

"Then how do you think those nesters could have gotten away with our cattle?" she said impatiently. "They couldn't have eaten that many steers."

"They know the trail toward the east," he said doggedly. "They admit that's the way they came from. Ain't nothing to stop 'em from drivin' stock back thataway, maybe as far as the railroad, and sellin' it—"

"Ridiculous!" she said, thinking of Slim Langley's eyes when she had defended his people. "I don't believe it. Didn't you see how poorly dressed they were, how poverty-stricken? Anyway, I'm willing to take a chance."

He rode close beside her, reached over and grasped her hand. His dark eyes were suddenly bright and Sally glanced away from his gaze, suddenly annoyed with him. She had known Cheb nearly all her life, but lately he'd made her feel uncomfortable when they were alone together because of his persistent proposals of marriage. She didn't love Cheb, and the thought of marriage without love frightened her. Maybe she wasn't being very successful as a rancher. But she wasn't going to marry some man just to get a good manager in the family.

Cheb was saying, "Sally, honey, why don't you marry me? You need me, and you know I've loved you for years now. Cattle raising is a man's job."

Impatiently she jerked her hand away. "It's not bad management on my part that we can't find the rustling gang that's stealing my cattle," she said defensively. "Besides, you say you've lost some of yours, too. And you say your men have been unable to find any trace of the rustlers—"

Hastily he broke in. "It ain't just that, Sally, honey. "It's that I love you so much, that I want you, Sally—"

Abruptly Sally jerked away, put the spurs to her roan and headed for home. Somehow, today more than usual, Cheb's love-making was repulsive to her. Even as that thought came to her, the memory of a lean face topped by sun-bleached blond hair came to her and inadvertently she found herself comparing Slim Langley with Cheb. . . .

SLIM LANGLEY, himself, came for the basket of medicine and fresh vegetables Sally fixed up for the nesters. It was late afternoon when he rode up, and a chill night wind was beginning to rise out of the hills.

As he stood before her, his blue eyes searching her face, an unexperienced thrill possessed Sally. She felt the color rise to her face and was glad of the gloom on the front porch.

"You're mighty kind," he said softly in that drawling, gentle voice of his—a voice that could crack hard and harsh as a whip at times, as she knew. "Reckon we're mighty lucky to have picked your spread to camp on. Believe me, Miss Sally, we're all mighty grateful to you."

Her eyes embarrassingly dropped from his and she noticed the worn thinness of his jumper. On cool nights like these . . . She thought of blankets then, asked him if his people could use some.

"Reckon they could," he said soberly. "They're mighty low on most everything. But I don't want to see you deprive yourself. . . ."

Because of the blankets, she rode back to the camp with him, to help carry the things, and realized as they rode through the night under a new, white moon, that she had been searching for an excuse to be with him a while longer anyway. . . .

He told her, as they rode, about the floods that had wiped out his home and the homes of those others with him.

"So we're pinning our hope on the future and the free land the government is going to give us. We'll have the spring and summer to get things started before the cold sets in, and with any luck at all, it ought to turn out all right."

After the grateful women and men in the camp had thanked her for the things, Slim said he'd ride back with her. All of her life she had ridden this range alone, both day and night, and she had no fear of anything she might encounter there. But Sally accepted his offer, sensing as she did that he would have ignored a refusal anyway, and suddenly elated at that realization.

Their horses stalked the soft, sandy trail at a slow walk. The moon rose high as Slim Langley talked of his hopes of the future, and Sally began to feel as if she had known him for years.

They reached the water hole that marked a boundary between hers and Cheb's land. The horses stopped of their own accord and as they drank, the two riders dismounted and let the reins hang loose. As they stood there close together, the silence of the night suddenly tingled with a thrilling intimacy. Sally began to tremble with an unfamiliar ecstasy that made her want to run away and stay beside him at one and the same time.

And suddenly it seemed the most natural thing in the world for his arms to close about her, his lips to crush her own in a kiss that wiped out all sense of time. She felt the warmth of his broad, hard-muscled chest, the steel of his arms that were gentle in spite of their strength. And in that moment of ecstasy she knew that this was the most important thing that had ever happened to her, the thing for which she had waited. . . .

"Sally . . . Sally, sweet!" he murmured huskily, his lips buried in the soft curls at her neck. Then, abruptly, he stiffened, broke off. His arms dropped from about her, hung limp at his sides as he looked down at her.

She stared up at him, bright-eyed, wondering; saw the lean face go tense as his eyes met hers. Then without another word he reached down, grasped the reins of his horse, moved away from her. And when he spoke his voice was measured, carefully controlled, formally polite.

"Thanks again for all you've done," he said. "And now that you've got a straight trail to the house, I'll turn back and help the boys bed things down for the night."

With that he was gone. Sally, feeling bewildered, puzzled and a little disappointed in spite of the thrill that lingered from that moment he had held her in his arms, stared after him for a long moment before she mounted and rode on toward home. And she lay awake a long while that night wondering about the strange change that had come over Slim Langley. But she went to sleep on the thought that tomorrow she would see him, and that she would talk to him again. . . . She wasn't unhappy, because that kiss had told her all she needed to know . . . and there was no doubt in her mind that Slim Langley loved her as she loved him. . . .

BUT he didn't show up the next day. Later in the evening, after supper, she was on the verge of riding over to the nesters' camp when Cheb Davis rode up.

"I got another letter from that Eastern outfit today," he said casually as he dropped down on the front steps, and swept off his big Stetson. "They're willing to raise their offer if we'll consider turning this country into a sheep range. . . ."

Sally had stiffened, for they had argued this out before. "Dad was a cattle man, Cheb," she said sharply,

"and you know as well as I do he would never have agreed to turning the LML into a sheep ranch. . . . I'm sticking to cattle raising."

But he went on, keeping his voice soft, unruffled. "Ain't no more money in cattle, Sally."

"There's as much as there ever was," she retorted. "And just because I've had a streak of bad luck, I don't intend giving up. I know that you can't turn your spread into a sheep ranch, Cheb, unless I agree to it. Dad told me that was in his written agreement with you when he sold you that land. And I'm sorry if you've set your head on becoming a sheep man. . . . For I won't agree to it."

He argued on a while longer, pointing out how much more money there was in sheep, how much less trouble they were. But she did not weaken, and waited impatiently for him to go. When he did, finally, take an abrupt leave, bidding her goodnight in a slightly irritable tone, she went to the corral and saddled her horse.

She rode toward the nesters' camp, filled with a thrilling expectancy. If Slim Langley's strange conduct, his reticence was due to the fact that he had nothing and that she was a big land owner, she had a solution for that. The thought had been born that day as she waited for him to show up, and as quickly she had thought of the solution.

She would tell Slim Langley of her plan tonight, and then maybe he would tell her of the things she knew must be in his heart. . . .

She recognized the black and white-spotted horse that stood beside the water hole, riderless, long before she was within hailing distance. It was Slim's horse! So he had been on his way to her, after all!

Then, even as she urged her horse faster, she saw the lean figure move out of the shadows behind the springs, lift into the saddle. Even as she cried out his name, Slim Langley put the spurs to his horse and rode away from the water hole. And without a glance in her direction he headed his mount toward the hills, and began to disappear into the night.

For a few moments Sally rode in hopeless pursuit. Then she pulled in the panting roan, sat staring toward the dark line of hills toward which the nester had disappeared. Why had he run away like that? And why toward the hills? Obviously, then, he had not been on his way to see her. . . .

Her heart was heavy and she was a little frightened as she rode home.

SHE was awakened early the next morning by the sound of excited voices outside her window. She recognized Cheb Davis' voice rising above the others. Hastily she dressed, and went downstairs. One glance at the grim faces of her men and a feeling of apprehension made her fearful even before Cheb spoke.

"You might as well know this without any trimmings," he told her abruptly. "Them nesters disappeared last night—and so did mighty near every head of cattle you had rounded up in the branding valley over by the hills."

For a moment Sally stared at him, her eyes filled with unbelief. Even as she protested that it couldn't be true, her own men corroborated Cheb's story.

"Moved out lock, stock and barrel," Jed Lane, her foreman, said. "And their wagons followed the same trail the cattle took. We followed the trail till we lost it on the rocky floor of one of them canyons that wind in and out. Then we stopped. They got a twelve-hour start on us, at least, and it'll take us days to search all those rock-floored canyons. They all connect, run into one another, and it's going to be luck if we pick the one they took, on the first search. I came back to tell you, and to pack up

enough provisions in case we have to search for days—"

Cheb broke in impatiently. "I suggest, Sally, that you let me send a posse of my men to search for the cattle. I've got more to spare than you have; besides, I've already got my outfit prepared for the search. Left them packing supplies when I came over to tell you all about it. They'll be ready to hike by now."

Heartsick, Sally suddenly didn't care what anybody did about anything. She was glad, for once, to turn things over to Cheb, and agreed, despite Jed's protest that it was the LML outfit's job, to let Cheb send some of his men to search the hills for her cattle. . . . She no longer cared about the loss of the cattle. The void in her heart made even that loss negligible now, although such a loss meant her finish. She had no reserve cash with which to restock the range. And practically every head of cattle she owned had been in that valley, driven there within the last few days by her boys, for the spring branding. . . .

As the men went about their chores and Cheb left to send his men off to the hills, Sally moved about the house, aimlessly, doing chores without being at all conscious of what she was doing. . . . Now Slim Langley's strange behavior that night by the waterhole had meaning. Possibly the thought of what he planned to do in return for her hospitality had caused him a moment of regret in the instant when he had been swept off his feet by the emotion that had caused him to kiss her.

She found herself trying to find excuses, to absolve him of the theft of her cattle. But it was the only logical conclusion. Every other thought left her up against a blank wall. . . .

The day dragged terribly. By dark, she found the strain of waiting for some word from Cheb so terrific that she got her horse and headed for Cheb's house. She knew that he did not go with the posse into the hills, and that if any sign of the nesters was found, one of his men would be sent back immediately to report. . . .

THE trail from her ranch led to the back of Cheb's house. She was passing the corral behind the house when she heard the first sound of a shot. Then, rapidly in swift succession, there were three more shots. And they came from the other side of Cheb's house, somewhere in front of it—and not very far away at that.

Sally didn't turn back. Instead, she urged the roan faster, rode up to the back door of the ranch house and dropped to the ground. As she did so, a man on horseback rode around the corner of the house. He held a gun in his right hand and it was already leveled at her when he got close enough to see her clearly.

The gun lowered to his side and he pulled the horse to a halt as he said, "Sorry, ma'am. Didn't take you fer a woman because of the darkness." Then, swiftly, "Better get inside the house, pronto, and keep outen the way. . . . Hurry!"

The man was a stranger, but there was a respectfulness in his voice mixed with a firm urgency. Without thinking, she obeyed his command, went into the screened back door of Cheb's house. Things had happened with such bewildering swiftness that she hadn't even had time to wonder what it was all about.

As she started for the front of the house, the firing ceased. Some of Cheb's men crouched in the darkness beside the front windows. Cheb was standing in the front hall, behind the closed door. He started at sight of her.

"Sally! What—"

Then a voice broke into his words —a voice that came from just outside the front door. And Sally caught her breath as she recognized it as that of Slim Langley!

"Come on out, Cheb Davis," he said, and there was a cold relentlessness in the tone that sent a shiver through the girl. "We don't aim to waste our ammunition and we don't want to kill any innocent men. You can save time and lives by coming with us."

Cheb was standing there tense, crouched like a man at bay and Sally stared at him in bewilderment. What on earth was it all about? Why was Slim Langley here, chasing Cheb, when it should have been the other way around. . . .

"Cheb," she whispered, "what does he mean? Where does he want you to go?"

He said quickly, "Sally, you go out the back door, quick, and head for home. Hurry!"

"I can't," she said. "There's a man there, at the door, and he wouldn't let me out I'm sure. Besides, I won't go until I know what's taking place here."

There was the sound of footsteps on the porch outside. Sally knew that unless Cheb and his men fired through the front door there wasn't a window that was placed so that they could aim a shot at the porch while they were inside the house.

Cheb knew it too, and she could see his indecision mount, turning to fear. His men stood about him now, waiting for orders. They were obviously as bewildered as Sally, and appeared reluctant to risk their lives by going out to face the men outside.

Then, abruptly, Cheb's face cleared, and he straightened, seemed once more sure of himself. He reached over, took Sally's arm. To his men he said swiftly, in a low voice:

"When I open the door and go out there, all of you stand ready here, just inside the door. And when I give the word, start shooting. . . ."

Slim Langley's voice called out: "Are you coming out, Cheb, or do I come in after you?"

Cheb reached for the knob of the door with one hand, still gripped Sally's arm with the other. The realization of what he meant to do came as he began to pull the door open, but shocked disbelief made her slow in reacting.

The door was open and Cheb was standing in the opening before she made a move. Then, as Cheb tried to maneuver her in front of him, she knew.

Slim Langley's eyes had gone to her face and there was a stunned look on his face. She saw him pause, saw the two guns in his hands waver slightly. She saw too that his hat was gone, that his head was covered instead with a turban of white bandages. His face was white and strained-looking in the moonlight.

In one swift glance she saw all this. She saw, too, the shadowy figures in the gloom out among the trees near the front gate. Slim Langley had come alone to the door, leaving his men to stand guard at a safe distance.

But even as she watched, the shadows began to move in closer. And even as Slim Langley hesitated, evidently bewildered at the sight of her, Sally heard Cheb rasp:

"Ready, boys!"

And then she knew! Horror filled her at the realization of his cold-blooded maneuver, at the knowledge that his next word to the men inside that darkened hallway would be "Fire!"

His hands grasped her arms now, as he held her in front of himself.

She felt Cheb tense, knew he was setting his muscles for a quick move to one side of the door when he ordered his men to fire at the tall, lean man who stood alone. . . .

She cried, "Drop, Slim! Lie flat—quick!" And as she yelled those words, she set her body to block Cheb's lunge to the right of the doorway. His own lips had issued the word, "Fire!" even as she had called out her warning to the lone nester,

and he had not figured on resistance from Sally.

She hadn't planned; there hadn't been time. She hadn't taken into consideration what would happen to herself or to Cheb by the move she made. She was thinking only of Slim Langley!

She thought only of saving Slim Langley's life, and she jerked with all her strength to the left even as Cheb, pulling her with him, tried to lunge to the right of the doorway, out of the line of fire from his men's guns.

The result was that they remained almost in the same spot. Cheb was so surprised at her resistance that he did not have time to marshal all of his strength to pull against her. Her resistance was enough to keep them almost in the same spot. . . .

Her move had been too fast for Slim Langley to see or to figure. His drop to the floor had been instinctive, she knew, as she called out her warning.

Then a roar filled her ears. Her eyes were on the figure of Slim Langley even as the guns in the hallway went off. Cheb lunged heavily and his weight crashed against her, shoved her to the floor, landed on top of her.

Dimly she heard a voice inside the hallway scream: "The boss! We hit the boss!"

She heard the clump of feet running as Slim's men came across the yard even as he yelled for them to stay back. Cheb's body was leaden, immovable, and its weight slowly pressed the breath from her body. She panted for breath, waited. . . .

But there were no more shots. The men in the hallway were bewildered suddenly, and one of them called out:

"We're calling a truce, Langley, till we find out just what we're fighting about. Tell yore men to hold their fire."

She heard Slim's voice issue that order and his breath was on her face as he uttered the words for he was bending over her, lifting Cheb's inert body. He lifted her from the floor, held her gently with strong, firm hands.

"Sally! Sally, are you hurt? If those dogs shot you, I'll—"

"I—I'm all right," she murmured, panting, leaning against him for support while she fought to regain her breath.

Her eyes followed his gaze then and she saw the spreading red spot on her shirt, felt for the first time the warmth of blood against her flesh.

"You're hit!" he said. "By heaven, if Davis isn't dead he'd better be. If you're hurt bad I'll make that—"

He stopped speaking, lifted her from the floor, carried her toward the doorway opening into the hall.

"Strike a light," he ordered, not even pausing to look at the men who stood there—the men who, a moment before, had fired the shots that were meant to take his life. "Get some hot water and bandages—quick!"

Swiftly, efficiently, Slim Langley brought order out of the chaos that had fallen so abruptly. Cheb was dead, killed by his own men, at his own order to fire. And those men had no incentive to continue the fight.

THE silent, lean, grim-faced members of Slim Langley's camp were lined about the room as Slim explained everything to Sally.

"We didn't steal your cattle," he said simply as he sat beside her after she lay with her shoulder bandaged. The bullet that had gone through Cheb's heart had passed on through the top of her shoulder, leaving a clean ridge that would heal swiftly.

"I was sure you didn't," she told him. "I—I couldn't believe that even after—after you'd gone away so

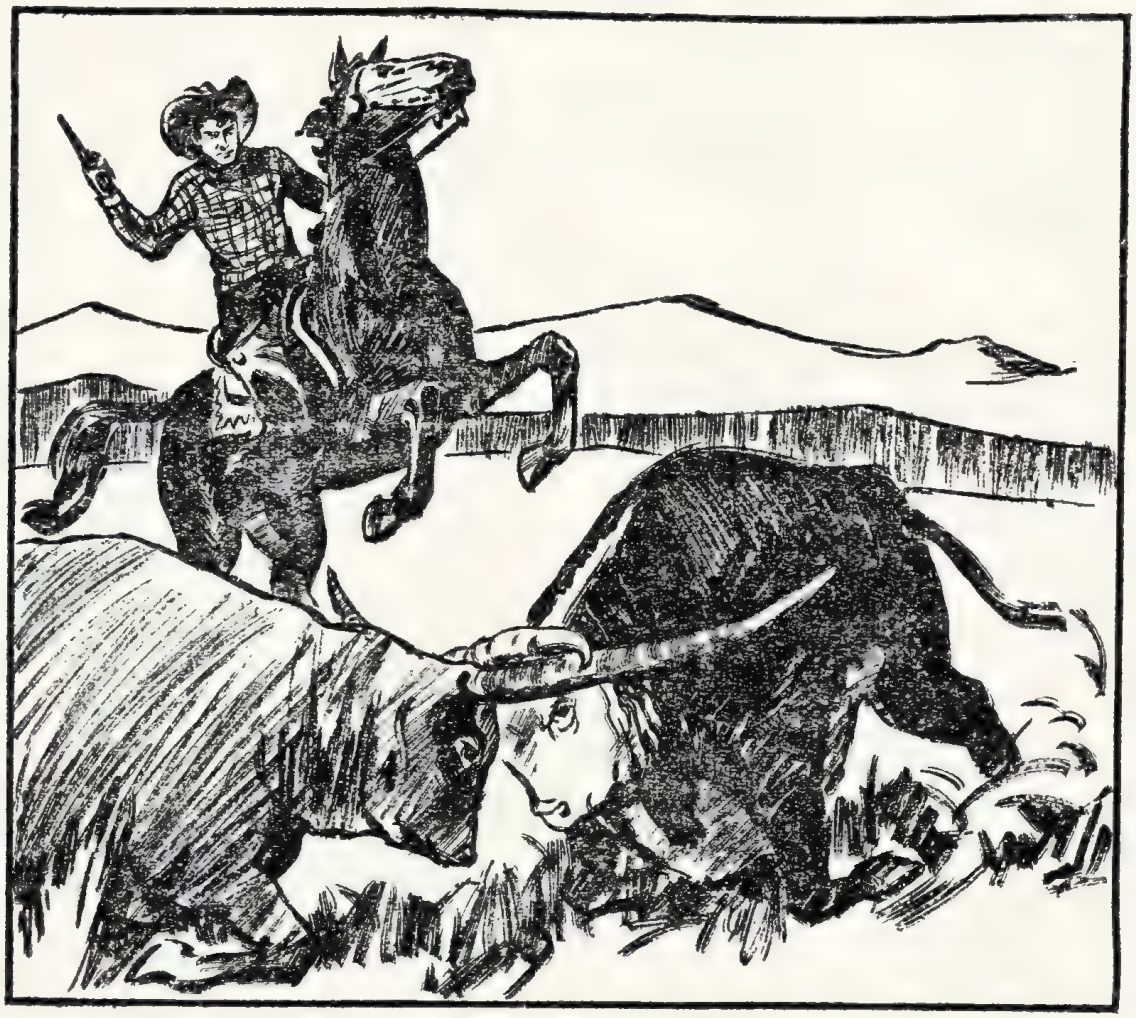
abruptly that night at the waterhole."

He seemed to forget the silent, listening men ranged around the room.

"I went away like that," he went on, "when I remembered suddenly that I had nothing to offer a wife—that you had more than I could hope to build up in years—"

Sally had struggled to an elbow now, faced him, eyes shining. "I thought it might be that," she said softly. "And the next night I rode over to fix that—I was going to suggest that your people settle on my land, work for me until they could get their own outfits going. I've got too much land anyway, more than we've ever been able to use. . . . And I was going to offer you the job as manager of the LML. Since dad died, it's needed more managing than I could give it. It's so big, it needs a man. . . ."

His eyes shone into hers with a light that thrilled her and set her heart to pounding wildly. In the little silence she heard the scraping of feet as the men began to move out of the room. Slim Langley didn't seem to notice that they were going, and Sally did not turn her eyes away from his. Her heart shone in her eyes.



"I love you so desperately, Sally Long, that I might listen to such an offer, though it is far too generous."

"I'm thinking of myself mainly," she said, suddenly afraid that he might refuse. "I need you—the ranch needs a man—"

He turned his eyes on the figure of Cheb Davis that was lying now on

the floor in the corner, covered with a coat.

"I reckon you do at that," he said grimly, "if you could have been taken in by him."

Sally shuddered as the memory of everything returned to break through her golden glow of happiness.

"What did he do?" she asked, puzzled. "I've known him for years. He —he wanted to marry me. I don't understand—"

"I don't understand it all," Slim said grimly. "But for some reason Cheb Davis wanted to rob you of your cattle." And as Sally stared at him with wide, surprised eyes, he went on:

"I was on my way to see you the next night after we'd stopped by the waterhole—"

"I saw you there," Sally said quickly. "But you rode away, toward the hills, as I came up."

He nodded. "I'd sat for an hour, hidden there, watching Cheb and his men drive the cattle I knew to be yours, out of that valley corral, and toward the hills. I overheard him tell one of his men where to take the cattle and to stay there with them until he came to meet them. I became suspicious, followed.

"Davis must have seen me following, laid for me, ambushed me, and left me for dead. The bullet stunned me, but it was just a graze." He fingered the bandaged head, went on:

"I was unconscious for hours. When I came to my horse was gone, and it took me a long time to make my way back to camp on foot. I found the nesters gone, followed their trail. They had stopped in the hills, and were searching for me.

"It seems Cheb had gone with his men and ordered them in the middle of the night, at gun point, to pack up and leave, had stayed there until they did. He drove them into the hills as far as the rock floor canyon maze and told them to keep going."

As he talked, Sally was remembering many things. . . . Cheb had tried for months to get her land and allow him to turn his into sheep-raising territory. He had been offered a contract with a big Eastern syndicate who would buy all the sheep and wool he could raise. . . . She could see it all now; when she had refused to marry Cheb, or agree to sheep raising, he had tried to ruin her so she would be forced to raise sheep or to give up her land. . . .

"I think I have the rest of the story," she said grimly, and swiftly told him of the sheep deal. He nodded.

"I figured something was going on that you didn't know about," he said. "So we left the women and children in the hills, and after I'd told my men what I knew, they came with me to help you straighten things out with Davis. After your kindness to us that was the only thing we could do to repay you. . . ."

She reached out, took his big, tanned hand in one of hers, drew him closer. She peered anxiously into his face.

"You'll stay, won't you?" she asked. "I want you to stay here!"

He took her into his arms, drew her close to him, minding the bandaged shoulder with gentle consideration.

"I reckon you're stuck with me for life, honey," he said gently. "And if we can find enough work for my friends until they get enough of a stake to finish that trip right—"

"They can stay as long as they like," Sally said swiftly. "There's land enough here for twice that many families, and this country needs some settling anyway. . . ."

"We'll settle all the details tomorrow," he said, rising to his feet and carrying her in his arms. "Right now I've got some things to say to you that'll sound better out in the moonlight."

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Now we're back together again, and here's quite a herd of letters for you to rope out and brand for yourselves. Saddle up and let's go down this trail of new adventures in friendship.

This is your own letter box, so find the kind of pal you want to swap talk with. I'm hoping you all find the far-off pals who'll exchange news and adventure with you the way you want to.

There are plenty of invitations to write, so pick your pardner and ride herd on your paper and pen. Good luck!

Your friend,

JOAN REMINGTON

DEAR JOAN,

I live in a small town in the mountains of Pennsylvania. I am Irish, five foot eight inches tall, and weigh one hundred and fifty-four pounds. I play all kinds of sports, and like hunting and fishing. And I just love to torment other people with my singing. If my voice was a little louder, I wouldn't need to write this letter.

But all kidding aside, I will answer all letters, and will exchange snapshots with anyone. So—here's hoping!

Starford,
Pa. BOB (Irish) MCCREARY

DEAR MISS REMINGTON,

Just a note to say I think *Western Romances* is a swell magazine. It gets my vote and my dime any time. At least every month.

Maybe some of the W.R. readers would like to write to an (almost) eighteen-year-old girl with brown eyes and hair, and a yen to write long letters. I'm tall, very active, and I like everything and everyone. Born in Arkansas, I've been in New York for four long years. Want to hear from pen pals everywhere. I promise to answer all letters, cards, or what-have-you.

566 Brook Avenue,
New York, N. Y. KAY PARSONS

DEAR MISS JOAN,

I would very much like to join your swell Round-up. I have heard that so many of my school friends are writing to pen pals. I like to type, and that is why I type my letters instead of writing them. I am seventeen and in my third year in school. I like to type about the interesting spots of Illinois as well as taking pictures of the spots. I sure wish you could get me a great amount of letters, so that I could get a lot of exercise for my typewriter.

I am waiting for the postman now.

1514 Lake Ave.,
Wilmette, Ill. HAROLD WAGNER

DEAR JOAN,

Am a peppy young girl of seventeen years. Have brown hair and grey eyes. Am five feet

four inches tall, weigh 120 pounds.

I am very much interested in art and am a kind of artist myself. I like any kind of outdoor sports and prefer boys with black hair and blue eyes. Will you be so kind as to help me? I would like to hear from boys from the ages of twenty to twenty-eight. Would like to have pals from the West of America.

Elandsfontein,
Eikerhof, MONA BEYLEVELD
Johannesburg,
S. Africa

DEAR JOAN,

I am a girl of twenty, have blue eyes and brown hair. I would like to hear from pen pals, especially sailors. I hope you will publish my letter.

16 Hennessey Pl.,
Halifax, N.S. MARY BOUCHARD

DEAR JOAN,

I am twelve years old, about four foot six inches tall, have curly light brown hair and grey eyes. I would like to hear from everyone far and near, from my age up to fifteen. I will prove a good pal to everyone who writes to me. I would like to hear from girls too.

R.R. #1, Box 12,
Akron, Colorado CALVIN DARBY

DEAR JOAN,

I have been reading *Western Romances* for some time and like nothing better. I am 17 years of age, five feet seven in height, and have black wavy hair and blue eyes. My sports are football, basketball, roller and ice skating. I am also interested in travel and would like pen pals from anywhere, both sexes.

Rt. 1,
Wymore, Nebr. DALE WALLACE

DEAR JOAN,

We are just three lonesome Texas gals wanting to hear from pen pals all around the world. We are called the Three Musketeers. You see, we are "all for one, and one for all."

We will answer all letters received.

"Ola" is a tall girl. Very quiet, with a sunny disposition. Has blue eyes and brown hair, and is seventeen.

"Corinne" is a slender girl, a very charming person. Has beautiful red hair, and is nineteen.

"Lenora" has very dark eyes and hair, and is very small. Can be very gay or moody, or what-have-you—she is twenty.

We all love sports, such as dancing and swimming, horseback riding, hiking, "kodaking", hunting. Just anything, as long as it's good clean fun.

So bring on all the pen pals. If you think you will like us, just sit right down and drop us a line, to make the three of us very, very happy.

Would like to hear from someone who likes horses and dogs, too. We will send snapshots, so come, one and all!

CORINNE NUESE,
San Marcus, Tex. OLA SAUNDERS
and LENORA

DEAR JOAN,

I am a young fellow of nineteen living on the north coast of Nova Scotia. I am five feet eight inches tall, weigh one hundred and fifty pounds.

My desire is to become an aviator, although boxing is my favorite sport. I plan to go away to learn aviation in the spring. I clerk in our store when I'm home.

I was born in Reading, England, and came to Nova Scotia when I was very small. Will exchange songs and snapshots with pleasure. Hoping to get lots of letters from everywhere, I am

Port Lome,
Anna Co., FRANCIS LEWIS
N.S.

DEAR JOAN,

I'm a girl of 18, was born on Xmas morning. Have brown eyes and hair, am five feet five and a half tall, and love most indoor and outdoor sports, especially dancing. Also like to exchange pictures and postcards. I'd like to hear from pals all over, especially those in Chicago, as I will be moving there next summer. I promise interesting and prompt letters to all who write, and will send my picture. Come on, pals —let's hear from you!

246 N. Third St.,
Rogers City, Mich. ROSE COMINSKY

DEAR JOAN,

I am writing you to see if I can find a pen pal. I am thirty years old and very lonely. I live in a small town where there is little to do for amusement. The only thing to do is ride through the country from town to town. Our climate is very mild, and so we have little cold weather. I am working in an office for the county. I have so little time to run around much, as I am at work most of the time. We have a junior college in our town and that keeps things lively most of the time. We have football games to go to while they are in season. I love a good ball game.

Poplarville,
Miss. AUGUSTA SHIVERS

DEAR JOAN,

There isn't going to be anything elaborate about this letter—just plain to the point.

Of course I am interested in pen pals. I already have some, but am anxious to have more. I have no particular place in mind. In fact, to hear from anywhere that you have a reader

TORTURED!

WASHINGTON'S SENSATIONAL BERRY-BAKER CASE

Many times had society's tongues in Olympia, Washington, wagged over the marital ventures of Dr. Kent Berry. But it was not until the fifty-year-old physician grew insanely jealous of his pretty twenty-seven-year-old wife that he committed a crime which blazoned his name on front pages all over the land.

Swearing that his wife had been betrayed by one of the guests at a three-day house party, Dr. Berry plotted horrible vengeance against handsome Irving Baker, whom he accused of the betrayal.

What really happened at that memorable house party? Why did Dr. Berry fasten suspicion on the guiltless Baker? What are the inside facts behind this twentieth-century inquisition, which rocked Washington with scandal and had its inspiration in the sadistic heart of a vindictive husband?

Look for this startling story in the March issue of INSIDE DETECTIVE, on sale everywhere February 1st!

INSIDE DETECTIVE

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Owlhootin' Sweetheart

By Cyrus Wells

Clay stared coldly at Tony "So that's it!" he said. "You had it all planned to meet him!"

Was she fated to ride the owlhoot trail always—when she so desperately wanted love—a home—curtains at the window?

THE rim of the early morning sun came up behind the ragged Jicarillas and peered curiously down at the herd of bawling cattle jostling their way into the mouth of Mescalero Pass. A dozen men and a girl rode at their tails, hazing them along to greater speed.

Tony Naylor pushed her battered old felt hat off the back of her unruly copper curls, so that it hung by its whangstring behind her straight young shoulders while she beat the dust of a long and fast cattle drive from her boy-size Levis and blue shirt.

She frowned with annoyance when she saw Lobo Rogas reining his horse around the edge of the herd to drop alongside her bronc. She didn't much like this *segundo* of the owlhoot band headed by her uncle, Slash Naylor. Weariness, too, tugged at even her youthful vitality, and warped her disposition after nearly a day and a night in the saddle.

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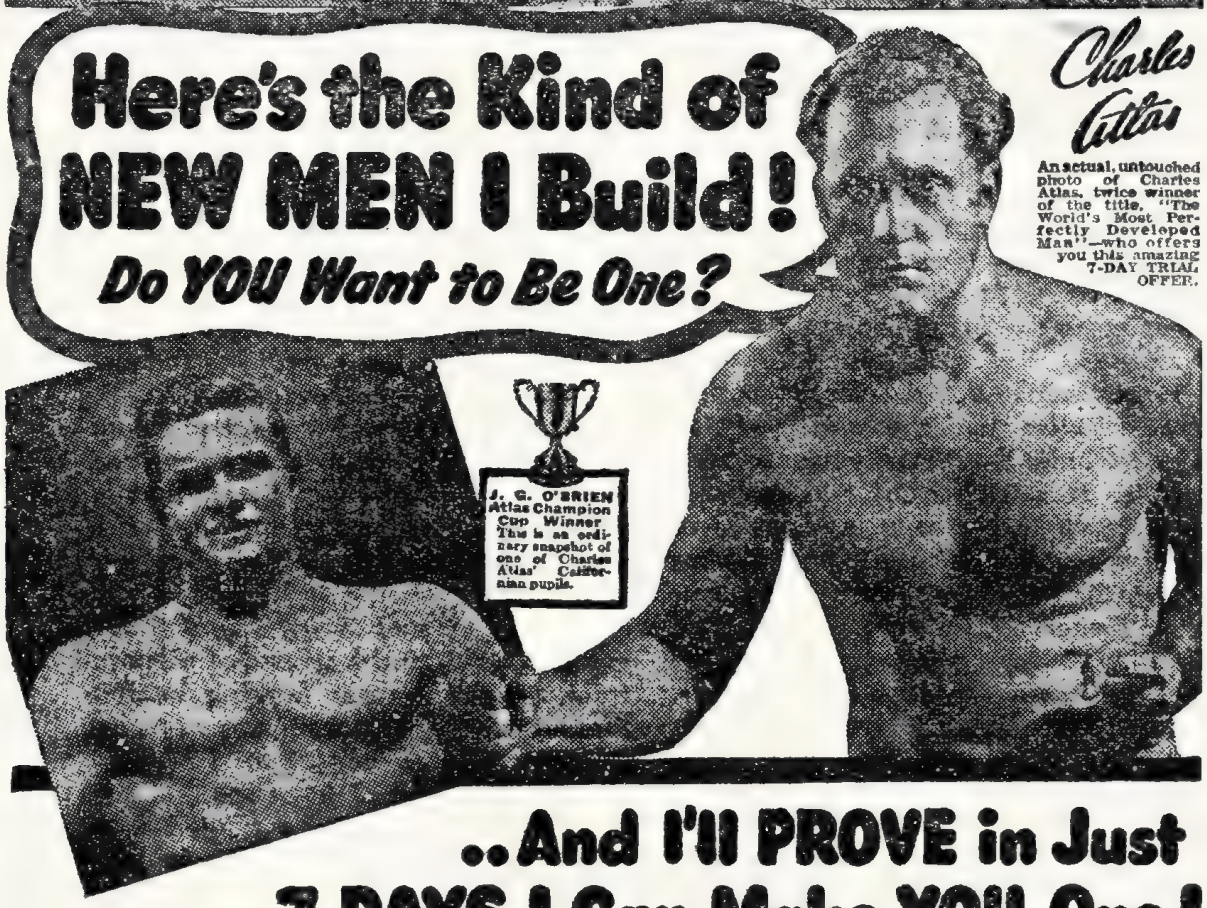

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The Mexican, so tall and thin that he looked absurdly like a dark toothpick under the toadstool of his huge, conical-crowned sombrero, ran bold black eyes over the girl's slim figure.

"Well," he murmured languorously, "now we are safe een the Pass weeth the biggest bunch of cattle ever rustle' een thees countree. How 'bout for leetle kiss to celebrate, eh?"

Tony shook out the thin rawhide quirt dangling from her wrist. "I'll tame you with this, Lobo, if you don't quite pestering around me," she threatened.

Rogas smiled delightedly. "*Carrajo!* The señorita has the spirit of the *ricos!* Of the De Bacas, your mother's people. It will be the fon to tame eet! Don't forget, *mia cara*, you are mine when we 'ave cross the Border and collect the dinero for thees cow from General Guillermo. I 'ave wait for long!"

"I'll be no sweetheart of yours, ever, Lobo Rogas," she told him coolly. "Slash and I've got other plans. The money from this raid will—"

Slash Naylor, his stocky body forking a big dun, came thrusting in between them. "What're you doing back here, Rogas?" he snapped. "I told you to scout out ahead for bushwhackers."

A scowl flitted across Rogas' dark, narrow face, then he smiled thinly. "*Si, si,* Señor Naylor." He shrugged suavely, roweled his bronc, wrenched it around on its hind legs and galloped up toward the head of the drive.

Slash looked after him thoughtfully. "That Greaser's gettin' too danged uppity," he growled. "I'd have to bring things to a showdown and salivate him, if this wasn't our last rustlin' raid."

"You glad, Slash?" asked Tony.

The old outlaw brightened visibly and smiled affectionately at her. "Uh-huh. We'll have us stake enough to go a long ways off some place where we ain't known as owlhooters and buy a little spread. You're gettin' growed up, Tony gal, and it's time you were knowing other gals, nice ones, and having young fellers comin' a-sparkin'."

TONY wondered how it would be to live permanently in a regular house with curtains at the windows, with even a tin bathtub, maybe. And to have as friends carefree girls with happy, clean-cut faces, and young men in whose honest, direct gaze lurked none of the jumpy furtiveness of men always on the dodge.

"Yes," she agreed absently. "And I'll get some clothes like the women in the towns wear. Say, Slash, reckon those skirts all open around the knees will be kinda loose and airy on my legs, eh?"

"Dunno. Never wore 'em," Slash grunted, squirting a stream of tobacco juice toward a steer lagging behind the herd. Tony cantered her pony over and popped the critter on its rump with the tag-end of her rope.

"Git along, cow!" she yipped happily. "We've got no time for fooling around!"

The walls of the Pass funneled into a narrow defile and Tony found herself and her uncle riding together again. "Be glad when we get—" Slash was saying, when a single shot from a .45 rang out from behind them.

It was a signal for twenty or more rifles to pop up from behind overhanging rocks on either side, the sunlight glinting on their barrels and little puffs of smoke coming from their muzzles.

The crackling volley of rifle-fire echoed ringingly down the Pass and one of the outlaws along the wing of the herd plunged from his horse. Others' broncs reared and plunged under the wrenching tug of startled hands on their reins.

"Ambushed, b'gosh!" commented Slash calmly. "That lazy Rogas didn't

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*(Signed) *H. C. S., Calif.*

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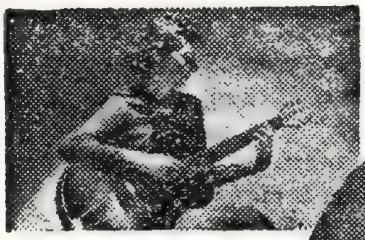

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scout— Hell's a-fire! We gotta backtrack and break through, afore them jiggers get us hemmed in!" He hauled his horse around. "C'm on, Tony gal!"

Tony spun her bronc, and saw the half-dozen cowboys fanning out across the Pass to bar their retreat.

She gave one last backward glance at the cattle. "Heck, there go my dresses!" she muttered, and spurred her horse into a dead run to sweep along shoulder to shoulder with her uncle.

Metal gleamed in a cowboy's fist as he raised his arm, and Slash chopped him from his saddle with a single shot from his deadly black gun. A square-shouldered ranny in a black neckerchief raced his fleet palomino to intercept them.

"That's Clay Breen, ramrod o' the Tumbling T," Slash remarked. Being shot at was an old story to the owl-hooter, and he knew the value of conversation to keep those around him from becoming excited. "Salty hombre—" Slash's eyes narrowed swiftly. "And too danged fast!" His gun swung up.

Tony saw the lean, bronzed face under Breen's Stetson. A sudden impulse made her swerve her racing pony to jostle Slash and knock the gun from his hand as he shot.

"Damn it, Tony gal! Don't ride so close," her uncle shouted. "Made me lose my—"

The whanging volley from the rifles drowned his voice.

BREEN dragged a long pistol from its holster, and Tony got panicky because she had disarmed Slash. Her own gun whisked from leather in the fast cross-body draw Slash had taught her, and went bucking and jumping in her slim hand. She aimed for the palomino, and the horse turned a somersault, its rider flying over its head.

"Them damn rifles!" growled Slash in a queerly choked voice, and Tony looked, saw him clinging weakly to his saddlehorn. She reached out a hand to steady him, but he rolled out of his saddle, away from her. "Keep a'going, Tony! They'll jail you for life if they catch—" His voice died away as he fell to the ground.

Then something *spatted!* against her own pony's side just ahead of her left ankle and Tony knew it was a rifle bullet. As the bronc dropped out from under her, she kicked free of the stirrups and lithely leap-frogged her saddlehorn, landing upon her feet, her slim legs already in high-gear and running like a scared rabbit.

A man suddenly loomed up, charging head-down toward her in great pantherish leaps. She skidded to a halt, swung her gun up wildly, in frightened excitement, and pulled the trigger. The man looked up as the big gun bellowed and she recognized Clay Breen. She could see him plunging headlong as the white powder-smoke spurted from her gun-muzzle, then he came lunging through the cloud of it. His hard fist cracked against her jaw. Everything went black and she felt herself falling.

THERE was the buzz of many voices, men's voices, in her ears when Tony came to consciousness. "Rogas and them two Mexes, Carlos and Pedro, got away," one said.

"Yeah," exulted another, "but we got the rest o' them, *includin'* Slash Naylor and that hell-fire young nephew o' his. All good rustlers, too. Deader'n dodoes!"

It was no news to Tony that the world at large thought her to be a boy. There had been reward notices posted, describing a slim, red-headed, tawny-eyed youth named Tony Naylor.

Footsteps approached and a hand grasped Tony's shirt at the neck and hauled her to her feet. "The young-un's not dead. Just knocked out!"

He shook her roughly. "Hey, quit playin' possom!"

Tony gathered her legs under her and raised long silken lashes to stare up at Clay Breen.

Clay Breen

"It's not necessary to maul me around," she said coldly. For nothing in the world would she let these enemies know that her knees were knocking together with terror. The Naylors took whatever fate handed them with their chins up.

"Wha—huh?" Breen stared at the small, tanned face. His long jaw sagged and he reached out an unbelieving hand to lift the wide, crushed hat and let her hair ripple free like spun, burnished copper in the sunlight.

"He's a gal!" he marveled, and released her abruptly. "I thought you were Tony Naylor, ma'am," he mumbled.

"I am," she admitted defiantly. "Antonia Naylor. Tony for short."

Her eyes ran over the group of staring, gaping Tumbling T punchers and rested upon a short, bow-legged hombre with a coiled *riata* in his hand. The waddy looked wonderingly all around the horizon, dropped his

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rope and kicked it behind him with awkwardly shuffling feet.

"Shucks!" he muttered. "Can't hang a gal, nohow! What'll we do with her?"

"Can't do nothing with her but turn her over to the sheriff," decided Breen grimly. "You, Shorty, get going right now for Ojo Secor, and have Sheriff Vedder meet us at the Tumbling T."

Shorty shamefacedly picked up his rope and hurried away.

Tony fidgeted restlessly. "I suppose there is no doubt that my uncle is —dead?" she asked, and carefully kept out of her voice the forlorn hope that was within her.

Breen flushed uncomfortably. "Yes'm. A rifle—he didn't hurt much before— I'm kinda sorry!" he blurted.

Tony's eyes became a little less tawny and the tears almost came.

"You needn't be," she said fairly. "He's expected it, like this, for—a long time. And he would have killed you, as he has other men, to keep from being captured."

She wondered a little dully if, perhaps, it wasn't best this way. There had been a doubt within her whether the old outlaw could forsake the wild life and settle down upon the small ranch he'd talked about.

Breen stared at her from slate-gray eyes that suddenly hardened. "He *was* your uncle, wasn't he? You don't seem to care much!"

Tony's chin lifted.

"That," she said briefly, "is my personal affair and needs no discussion. Shall we go, now, to meet the sheriff?"

She felt like some small, trapped wild animal under the gawking stares of the men, but would make no bid for sympathy by displaying her grief before their curious eyes.

SHE maintained her aloof, frozen silence on the ride to the Tumbling T. Darkness fell before they arrived and she swung down from her saddle and determinedly straightened her weary little body before marching into the living room ahead of Breen.

The plump, pink-skinned man in city clothes who lounged in an easy chair blinked bright-blue eyes at her in the lamplight. He shot suddenly to his feet when she lifted off her hat and brushed disordered curls back from her forehead.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "A visitor! And such a gorgeous— Umph! Welcome to the Tumbling T, Miss— Miss—"

"Tony Naylor," grunted Breen.

"By heaven! Not the out— Oh, yes, Shorty said—but y'know, I expected an entirely different—" He fiddled with the lamp on the center table to cover his confusion, turned it up so that it blazed brightly. "My word, Miss Antonia, my foreman forgot to introduce— I'm Wombley Tate— your host, as I happen to—er—own the Tumbling T. May I offer you a drink? Something?"

He was a new breed of hombre to Tony, but there was an unaffected friendliness about him that she liked. Tony wasn't much used to friendliness. She smiled slowly.

"No, thanks. Just the sheriff, please. We will go on—"

"Oh, the law chappie! Y'know, Shorty brought word that he'd gone to the County Seat for the Court session. His deputy, too."

"Of all the danged foolishness, both o' them gone at the same time!" grumbled Breen. "What're we going to do with Tony until they come back?"

"Why, Miss 'Tonia shall stay here at the ranch. As our guest, of course. Capital idea, what? A most charming and delightful guest, too. Brighten things up a bit for us."

"Probably," agreed Breen drily, and his gray eyes studied Tony questioningly. But he said nothing when

Wombley Tate ceremoniously escorted her upstairs to the door of a big, clean bedroom.

Tony smiled a good night to him and listened alertly at the closed door for the sound of a bolt shooting home. She heard none and smiled a little secret smile as she sat on the edge of the bed and tugged off her scuffed boots, letting each one drop to the floor on its worn-down heel with an audible thump. She was a little puzzled—Clay Breen did not impress her as a man who would be careless about details.

As for Wombley Tate, for all that he talked like an immature youth, she figured him as around forty. Obviously an Easterner, but nice. Looked at her as if she were human and not some rare and peculiar exhibit. She was sorry that she would see no more of him as she flopped, fully clothed, across the bed. Instantly, she fell asleep.

TONY awoke, as she had planned, shortly after midnight. She stole, boots in hand, silently as a wraith out her door, down the upper hallway. She felt that she was good as free when she reached the head of the stairway safely.

Then strong arms came out of the darkness to close tightly around her. Instantly she was fighting with the fury of a trapped wild-cat, but her small fists merely drummed impotently against the man's hard chest, and it hurt her stockinged toes when she kicked his shins.

"Quit it!" a deep voice command. "Want to wake the whole house?"

She leaned against him weakly. From the clean smell of soap and tobacco and leather about him, she knew that he was Clay Breen, and realized that he was *not* careless about details.

"Where you going?" he demanded.

"Does that matter?" she asked helplessly, her heart down in her toes.

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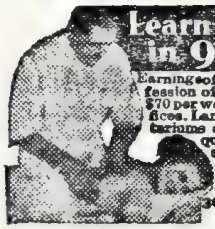

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She felt sick and giddy as the cold knowledge swept over her that she had not given any thought to where she would go.

"I—I don't know," she muttered honestly. "I was just getting away, that's all."

Breen laughed shortly. "You Rogas' gal? Do you want to go back to him?"

"No!"

"All right. If you'll promise me not to pull no more shennanigans, I can get caught up on my sleep."

"Doesn't look like there is any use my trying to escape, with nowhere to go," she said miserably. "I promise."

On that, he led her back to her room and firmly closed the door between them, but did not lock it.

AT BREAKFAST, next morning, Breen silently tore into his flapjacks, bacon and coffee with the appetite of a healthy man planning a full day's work.

Occasionally his level gaze met Tony's and made her uncomfortably aware of a questioning, dubious light in their depths. She wished, somehow, that it wasn't there.

It was her looks, she decided unhappily. There hadn't been much she could do about them, except wash her face carefully and dampen her hair and try to comb some of the unruliness out of it. Her shirt and Levis were old and faded and patched. They looked out of place inside a house, but they were all the clothes she had.

When the meal was finished and Breen went off about his ranch duties, she wandered into the living room and found, of all things upon a ranch, a copy of *Godey's Ladies' Book.*

Curled up in a big chair she stared with wistful amazement at the fashion-plate wood-cuts.

Tony had never possessed a dress in her life, had always worn overalls and jackets and things that could stand the rough life of the Owlhoot Trail. Her parents had been homesteaders, but had been killed in a raid by cattlemen upon the "nesters" before she was a year old. Her uncle had escaped the massacre with her, but had been driven into outlawry because of the raid he afterward made in reprisal for the murder of his brother and sister-in-law. That was why he and Tony felt that they were only collecting their just dues when they rustled such cattle as they could manage. But it had never been a profitable business. Right now, Tony had but three dollars in her pocket

She looked up from her magazine. "Say, Mister Tate, women's clothes don't cost much, all made of light weight stuff like that, do they? Reckon I could get an outfit for three dollars?"

Tate choked over the tall drink he was nursing in his hand, gave her a quick, searching glance and got up to set his glass upon the center table.

"Why—er—yes! No, they are not expensive," he said blandly. "Capital idea, what? You would be stunning in the proper— I would enjoy seeing— It would impress the jury at your trial, my dear. You have no idea of the effect clothes have upon men."

Tony had figured something like that, too. After all, she was a woman and had some feminine instincts, even if she had not been thinking about a cowtown jury.

Wombley thought it a "Capital idea, what?" to drive the buckboard into Ojo Secor immediately, and he seemed to know the man Holton, who ran the general store, pretty well. The two men stood aside talking and smiling, while a saleswoman fixed Tony up with a big bundle of frilly

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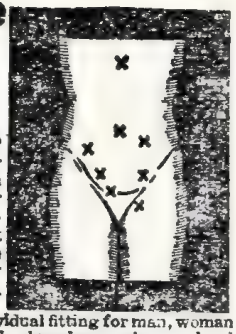

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doo-dads. She was so excited that she never noticed the dour glance of the saleswoman when she handed the storekeeper a list of the items.

He glanced over it carelessly. "H'm, that will be two seventy-five, miss."

Tony was a little surprised that such pretty things were so cheap, but she had never had a chance to price them. She'd have had a few pretties all along, if she had known.

She paid her money, grabbed her bundle and dashed out to the buckboard, impatient to get back to the ranch and try her new things on. And —yes—show them off before Clay Breen.

TATE let the broncs crawl all the way back to the ranch, it seemed to Tony. It was almost sundown before they arrived and she could fly up to her room with her bundle.

It was a couple of hours before she came down the stairs. Her hair had been brushed until it shone in the lamplight like a newly minted penny, and she looked like a dream in her full-skirted frock of soft, fluffy material.

"By Jove! You're lovely!" Wombley Tate exclaimed.

Tony's excited little grin sent a dimple playing in her left cheek. But when her questing, tawny eyes couldn't find Breen, her shoulders drooped a little.

The ranch foreman did not return until after Tate, pleading fatigue, had gone to bed. Tony figured she wasn't sleepy yet and sat in the living room studying her *Godey's* magazine.

When Clay Breen's booted tramp came across the porch and into the room, she wanted to leap to the toes of her lovely new slippers and pirouette before him. But she didn't.

She just arose languidly from her chair—the way it said in the article on *"Decorum and Deportment"* in her book—and crossed the room with just a little sway to her walk.

"You've been working late, Clay," she said coolly. "I'll call the cook and get you some supper."

Breen's snarl froze her in her tracks, and the fury in his gray eyes brought her hand up to her slim throat.

"Where'd you get such duds?" he demanded.

"Why, Ojo Secor," she explained, puzzled. "I had three dollars—"

"You had three dollars, so you bought a full set o' frills!" he sneered. "Expect me to believe that? Well, I've just been to Ojo Secor to pay off the bills. Rode in from the range and got there after you and Tate had left. Holton gave me the account, itemized right up to the minute!"

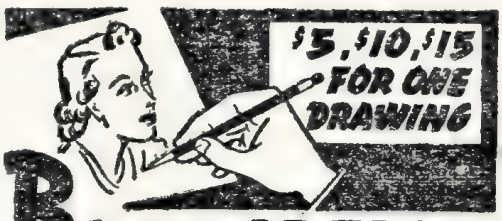
His tone riled her, and her chin lifted dangerously. "Well, what of it?" she blazed.

"What of it! So you're letting him buy your clothes, now! The poor simp

Tony

even charged 'em to the ranch account! And I'd begun to figure you were a nice gal! You ought to be ashamed to lead on a softie like him! He's a pretty decent hombre, in spite o' being raised the fool way he was!"

Tony couldn't understand what Clay was driving at, but she could



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see that he was plenty mad—and she wasn't used to being browbeaten.

"Well, what business is that of yours?" she demanded, drawing herself up to her full five-feet-three.

Clay's shoulders suddenly slumped a little and the anger in his eyes was replaced by a baffled, frustrated expression.

"None, I reckon," he muttered. "That's right—none. I'm hired to herd his cows and catch rustlers, but he's supposed to be old enough to run his own morals. But he's such a danged fool!"

Tony stared at him and the color drained from her face at his sneering contempt. She stamped a high heel furiously.

"You—you—" She choked helplessly and went flying up the stairs to her room and banged the door viciously.

INSIDE, Tony lit her lamp with trembling fingers and sank down upon the edge of the bed. After a long while she figured out that her money had not been enough and Wombley Tate had had her clothes charged to him. She didn't see anything wrong with that—he was just a friendly cuss—but Clay thought there was something terrible about it. He'd looked at her as though she was vile.

She swiftly stripped off every garment of the new outfit that had made her so gay and happy and bundled them up carefully. It was the devil of a note, she meditated bitterly as she put on her old duds, that a friend like Tate couldn't do you a favor without a ruckus being raised about it! She wasn't going to stay around such crazy people. They thought such mean things!

Downstairs, she ran into Clay Breen, coming in from the chill gray of early dawn. His eyes swept over her range garb and rested on the bundle of clothing.

"So yo're leaving!" he said tonelessly. "Good idea, since you're not the right kind to live among civilized people. I'll saddle a hoss for you."

Withered to speechlessness, she dropped the bundle on the living room table, where Wombley Tate would be sure to find it, and followed Breen toward the corral.

As they rounded the house, a tall, big-hatted figure materialized from the shadows, and the gun in his hand glimmered dully in the dim light.

"Stand heetched, Señor Breen!" he commanded softly. "Raise the han's and don't mak' the noise. Thees gon is what you call hair-trigger!"

Breen raised his arms shoulder-high. "Hello, Rogas," he said, without surprise. "So *you're* the hombre who's been skulking around here all night!"

"*Si.* I 'ave come for the señorita."

Clay Breen turned and stared coldly at Tony. "So that's it!" he said. "You had it all planned to meet him. What a fool I've been!"

Tony shrugged despairingly. She knew the uselessness of trying to deny anything to him now, and she recognized more fully than Breen the deadliness of the trap into which they had fallen. The Mexican was a rabid, ruthless killer and would not hesitate to shoot both her and Breen at a moment's whim.

"Quit mak' the talk!" the outlaw snapped. "Onbuckle the gun-belt, señor, and let eet drop. Then march over to the cottonwood, where Pedro and Carlos hold the horses." His left hand jutted a thumb at the clump of trees around a small waterhole a quarter-mile away from the house.

BREEN slowly loosened his belt and let it drop, and Tony trudged beside him as they went away from the ranch buildings. Her heart was thumping like the hoofs of a horse running upon hard ground. She knew as well as though she had al-

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ready seen it happen that Rogas would kill Clay. At the last moment, when the outlaws were mounted and ready to ride away, he would shoot the ranch foreman in the back, without compunction. She forgot her own peril at the thought of Clay lying crumpled and lifeless upon the ground.

She slowed up the progress of their march as much as she dared by taking little short steps, to make it look as though she was hurrying nervously; all the while praying desperately that some one of the Tumbling T men would be astir early and see them. But they approached the clump of trees at what seemed to her express speed without interruption.

Within the shadows, the two *bandidos* held the reins of four saddled horses.

"Mount!" commanded Rogas curtly, his long-barreled gun staring at Clay like the head of a poised snake. "Pedro, give Tony the bay."

The bay was high-strung and danced nervously around when Tony took the reins.

"This bronc's boogery. He's not woman-broke," she complained. "And I forgot my spurs."

Anything for delay! she thought.

The two *bandidos* swung up into their saddles.

Rogas growled irritably, "Carlos, geeve 'er your spurs!"

Carlos grumblingly took off the cruel Mexican-type rowels, and Tony strapped them to her heels

"All right. We must go *pronto*," Rogas urged, impatient. "The day ees come queek!"

Tony made the bay dance away from her by surreptitiously jabbing his ribs with her thumb, while vainly trying to hook her toe in the stirrup.

"Wait for me!" she begged.

"Sure—wait for her!" said Breen bitterly. "Then shoot, you damn' murderin' thief! I can *see* that's what you plan."

Tony's toe found her stirrup and she sprang lithely into her saddle. Instantly she raked the spooky bronc from withers to flanks with the big spiked wheels of her spurs and jumped him straight at Rogas.

She yelled wildly as the chest of the bay struck the outlaw aside and crashed into his buckskin, standing behind him. She went down in a welter of thrashing, kicking horses' hoofs. At the last moment she was flung clear of the broncs—and her small body smashed blindingly into a tree-bole. . . .

SHE felt as if she was all just one aching bruise when she awoke. "Wha—what?" she muttered.

"Be still, honey," said Clay's voice. "Everything is all right. You gave me the chance to jump Rogas and grab his gun. Them other two Mexes lit out for the Jicarillas *pronto*."

She blinked open her tawny eyes, and saw Clay's face bending over her. Her gaze traveled all around, and she saw that she was lying on the bed in the room that had been hers. Her legs and arms worked when she wriggled them experimentally, and she climbed to her feet. Her head hurt. Her exploring fingers found a bandage about it.

"Well, thanks for fixing me up," she said, and limped painfully for the door. "Reckon I can go now."

Clay moved in front of her, barring her progress.

"Go!" he demanded. "Where to?"

"I don't know," Tony said dully. "But I don't belong here. You said—"

His face turned brick-red.

"Aw—I was just crazy jealous, honey!" he said. "You don't belong nowhere else but right here on the Tumbling T."

"Quite right! Capital idea, what?" chimed in Wombley Tate, but Tony didn't even hear him, because somehow Clay's arms had opened and she walked right into them.

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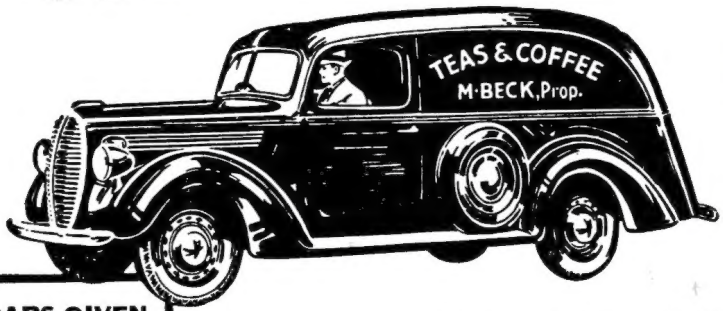

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